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JULY

MAGAZINE



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A.MERRITT'S CELEBRATED CLASSICS OF FANTASY 25¢ FANTASY MAGAZINE

VOLUME 1

JULY, 1950

NUMBER 4

An Epic Novel of Haunted Treasure

THE FACE IN THE ABYSS. A. Merritt 12

Nicholas Graydon set out to explore a mystery, ancient beyond all memory of man, and riches untold—in the treacherous hills of bewitched Cordillera de Carabaya.

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Weird Novelette of Sinister Power

THE GREEN FLAME.....Eric North 64

Most diabolic of criminals was Toad, whose chilling secret surpassed any human knowledge. Because of it, his power was crushing—more terrible than hatred.

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Cover by Norman Saunders

Illustrations for THE FACE IN THE ABYSS by Virgil Finlay

Illustrations for THE GREEN FLAME by Paul Callé

Next Issue Published August 2nd

Any resemblance between any character appearing in fictional matter, and any person, living or dead, is entirely coincidental and unintentional.

Published quarterly by Recreational Reading, Inc., an affiliate of Popular Publications, Inc., at 1125 E. Vaille Ave., Kokomo, Indiana. Editorial and Executive Offices, 295 East 22nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. Henry Stoen, President; Secretary, Harold S. Goldstein; Vice-President and Treasurer. Entered as second-class matter at the Post Office at Kokomo, Indiana. Copyright 1950, by Recreational Reading, Inc. This issue is published simultaneously in the Dominion of Canada. Copyright 1950, by International Copyright Convention and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. All rights reserved, including the right of reproduction, in whole or in part, in any form, simple copy, etc. Annual subscription for U. S. A., its possessions and Canada, \$1.00; other countries, \$2.50 additional. All correspondence relating to this publication should be addressed to 1125 E. Vaille Ave., Kokomo, Indiana, or 295 East 22nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. When submitting manuscripts, enclose a stamped, self-addressed envelope for their return, if found unavailable. The publishers will exercise care in the handling of unsolicited manuscripts, but assume no responsibility for their return. Printed in U. S. A.

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READERS' COLUMN

THE back log of letters is becoming tremendous! And we have only you to thank, our very encouraging and enthusiastic supporters. Your letters are a source of real joy to us, for it is only through you that we can tell if our selections are what you have wanted brought back.

It is also grand to find fans with so many varied ideas. You might think that would bring up complications. It does, but they are the kind of complications that we like. Your lively interest enriches AMF. Your suggestions provide a variety of material of greater and greater scope. We are most thankful.

And now, without wasting any more of this very precious space—on to your letters!

Sincerely,

—The Editor

BEWILDERED

Dear Editor:

A discovery! I found your second issue of AMF in the local drugstore and am thrilled with it. I've been a science-fiction fan for about ten years, but consider myself an authority since I have been able to beg, borrow or buy scores of magazines dating clear back to 1933. And your new magazine shows promise of equaling any other publication ever on the market.

"The Smoking Land" was good! And it was the first time I had read Challis. A new-found author—a good one—is like a new friend. Just one thing that puzzled me—there were at least two references to a sort of going backward in time which were never explained or elaborated upon. One is on page 21, when Smoky sees a photo of the message left by Cleve Darrell. "That writing belonged to Cleveland Darrell No, not his grownup hand, but to the sort of scratching that he used to make in his copybooks when we were youngsters together—".

And again on page 38, when Smoky landed on the coast of the Smoking Land: "I think the mere flight through the air was what knocked me out of time!" Did Challis change his mind in the course of the story? I was led to expect that Darrell's experiments had blown him into another time, and Smoky was flung into the same drift by the storm, but no, it turns out that Darrell was kidnapped by the people of

(Please continue on page 8)

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(Continued from page 6)

the Smoking Land, and Smoky found it through pure chance, and their return was a relatively simple matter. Confusing, but such a small thing that it didn't really detract much from the quality of the story as a whole.

I had read "Three Lines Of Old French" some time before, but Merritt is always worth reading over and over again. "The Seal Maiden" was light and easy reading, and I enjoyed it too, though it was quite reminiscent of Bradbury.

I would like to put in my vote for a book-length novel of Merritt's, but I can't remember the title! I read it years ago, and the only bit of the title I can remember is "Dwellers". All about little people and a menacing thing like the legendary Kraken. Any of your readers recognize it? I would like to read it again.

And so long as I am enlisting the help of readers, can anyone help me track down the word "leprechaun"? It's not in my dictionary, encyclopedia, or thesaurus, and though I started looking for it as a whim, it has almost become an obsession since I can't find it defined or even mentioned in any of the reference books I have access to. Maybe the name is as elusive and enchanted as the creature it belongs to! I have eerie visions of blackened type-setters putting the word into their books, and the word and definition disappearing without a trace before the book is sold and read!

Well, now you have the opinion of a self-styled authority on science-fiction and fantasy and my request for help and my choice of one story for a future issue. I hope to see AMF on the stands for long years to come, and also to see the Readers' Column expand to gigantic proportions.

Sincerely,
Nancy Weston
856 Arnold Street
Newport News, Va.

ED: "The Dwellers In The Mirage" was printed in FN, September 1949. Cleve Darrell had to scratch the message he dropped to the world, thus the similarity to his boyhood scratchings. The mention of time simply means that Smoky was knocked out—completely unconscious of the passing of time or anything else about him. Leprechaun is the Irish word for elf, sprite, pigmy or goblin.

HIGH HOPES!

Dear Editor:

I was most surprised and pleased to find in the December 1949 issue of FAMOUS FANTASTIC MYSTERIES the announcement of your new magazine, apparently to be principally devoted to the attractive presentation of the works of A. Merritt alone, although I gather that each issue will be filled out by stories of other authors.

(Please continue on page 122)

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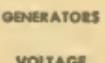
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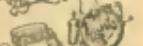
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MATERIAL: Film
VIEW: *Don't*
How: *Don't*
MATERIAL: Film
VIEW: *Don't*

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of a man
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CALLING ALL FANTASY FANS!

WE ARE extremely glad to be bringing you in this issue of A. MERRITT'S FANTASY an unforgettable classic of adventure and haunted treasure by your favorite author of fantasy. A. Merritt's "The Face in the Abyss" needs no introduction. This novel has not been reprinted for many years, although it has been much in demand, and is certainly one of Merritt's most beloved stories.

To compliment A. Merritt we are bringing you for the first time a story by Eric North. You well-read fantasy fans will recall not only "The Green Flame" but also "Three Against The Stars" and his many assorted short stories.

Every now and then one finds a bit of the author's private experiences either coming out in his fantasy writings or influencing them to a marked extent. We have previously mentioned that Theodore Roscoe's inveterate traveling provided untold opportunities for him to gather firsthand impressions of unusual countries as well as to delve personally into the rich source of legendary material. And in a similar way we find that Eric North's interest in governmental affairs is brought out in his sinister novel of "The Green Flame."

Eric North, known in private life as Bernard Cronin, wrote more prolifically twenty years ago, and for that reason was much better known then, than he is today. Born in Australia, he has lived the better part of his life on that continent. His works, however, have been published all over the English-speaking world. His interest in working in the Australian government has slowly taken precedence over his desire to write, so that today, he has almost entirely ceased to exercise his literary talents. In this magazine you see him only as a writer of fantasy, but he has written many straight short stories as well as full-length books of fiction. It is, therefore, with great pleasure that we give you one of Eric North's most successful

and exciting stories "The Green Flame."

And now a word about A. MERRITT'S FANTASY in the future. Starting with this issue, A. MERRITT'S FANTASY is being changed to a quarterly. The next issue, dated October, will go on sale in August. We hope that you, our fantasy fans, will not forget about A. Merritt over the summer months. Those who have already subscribed to A. MERRITT'S FANTASY are assured of receiving their six copies of this magazine.

In the October issue of A. MERRITT'S FANTASY we will bring you an outstanding collection of fantasy authors—George Allan England, Elinore C. Stone, Jack Williamson, and J. C. Marshall. The lead novel by G. A. England is entitled "The Elixir of Hate." This mysterious tale of a doctor finding the essence of youth takes place in the exotic, azure-shadowed hills of France's Midi. Here is a story both weird and terrifying, unusual for its presentation and for its scope of imagination.

We are always glad to bring you stories of your regular authors, but we are also extremely pleased when we can introduce to you a new name who has written outstanding fantasy stories. Just such an author is Elinore C. Stone whose mysterious "Devil-Fish" will appear in the October issue of A. MERRITT'S FANTASY.

Two stories, more on the super science angle of fantasy will complete the issue. The interplanetary novelette by Jack Williamson "Racketeers in the Sky" will carry you off the surface of the earth—into the yet unexplored orbit of mysterious heavenly bodies.

A short story by J. P. Marshall "The World in the Balance" will bring you the city of New York besieged by a strange power—whose Achilles heel is Gold!

The October issue of A. MERRITT'S FANTASY will be published on August 2nd.

—The Editor.

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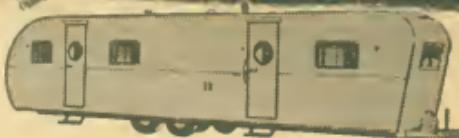
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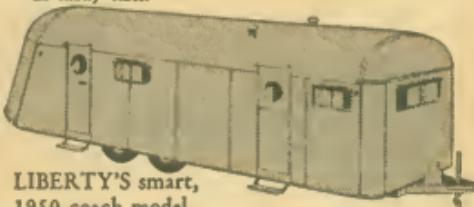
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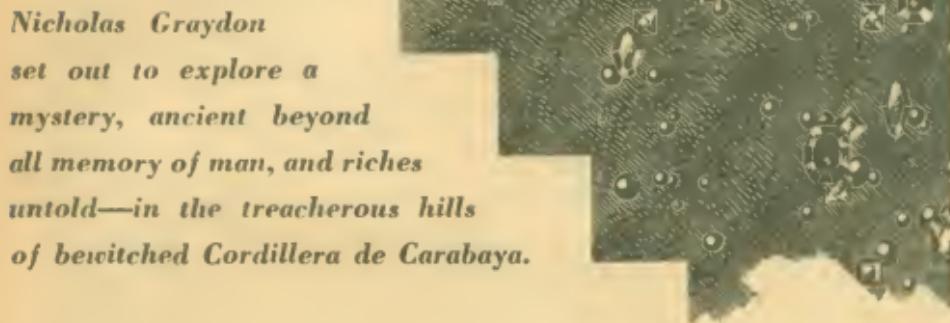
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set out to explore a
mystery, ancient beyond
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untold—in the treacherous hills
of bewitched Cordillera de Carabaya.*

A. Merritt's

EPIC NOVEL OF HAUNTED TREASURE

THE FACE IN THE ABYSS

CHAPTER 1

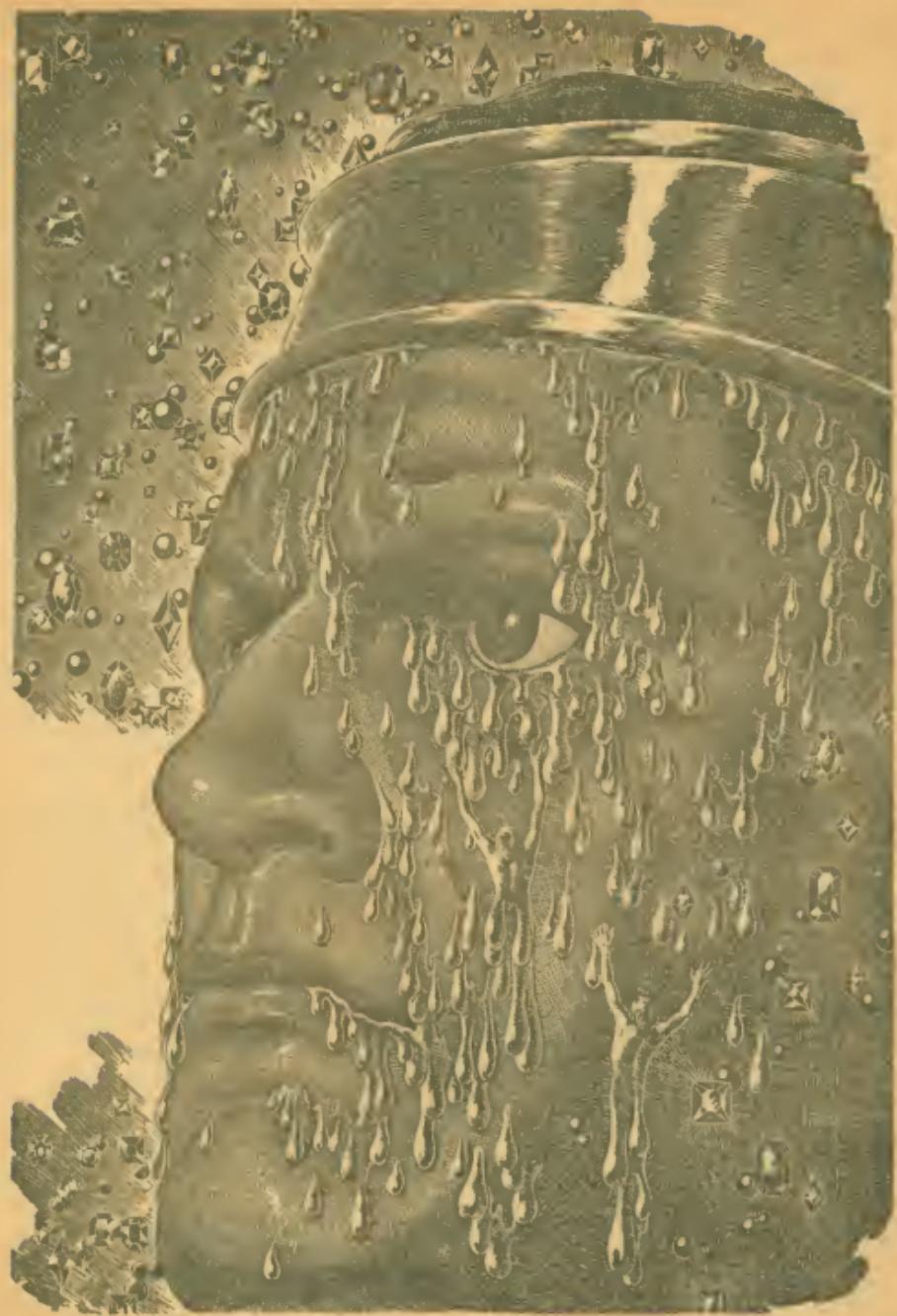
Out of the Haunted Hills

IT HAS been just three years since I met Nicholas Graydon in the little Andean village of Chupan, high on the eastern slopes of the Peruvian uplands. I had stopped there to renew my supplies, expecting to stay not more than a day or two. But after my arrieros had unlumbered my luggage from the two burros, and I had entered the unusually clean and commodious posada, its keeper told me that another North American was

stopping there in the village of Chupan.

He would be very glad to see me, said the innkeeper, since he was very ill and there was no other Americano in the hamlet. Yes, he was so ill that he was, to tell me all the truth, certain to die, and it would beyond doubt comfort him much to have a fellow countryman with him when that sad moment came. That is, he added, if he were able to recognize a fellow countryman, since all the time the señor had been at the posada he had been out of his mind with fever, and would probably pass away so.

Then with a curiously intense anxiety



The Face was living! And it was promising him this world and dominion over this world—if he would but come to it!

he implored me to stay on until death did come; a matter, he assured me, that could be one of only a few days—maybe hours.

I bluntly asked him whether his desire for me to remain was through solicitude for my ailing countryman or through fear for himself. And after a little hesitation he answered that it was both. The señor had come to the village a week before, with one burro and neither guides nor arrieros. He had been very weak, as though from privations and long journeying. But weaker far from a wound on his neck which had become badly infected. The wound seemed to have been made by either an arrow or a spear. The señor had been taken care of as well as the limited knowledge of the cura and himself permitted. His burro had been looked after and his saddlebags kept scrupulously closed. But I could understand that questions might be raised after the señor's death. If I remained I could report to the authorities that everything possible had been done for the señor's comfort and testify that none in Chupan was responsible for his injuries.

This did not sound very convincing to me, and I said so. Then the worthy innkeeper revealed what actually was in his mind. The señor, he said, had spoken in his ravings of dreadful things, things both accursed and devilish. What were they? Well—he crossed himself—if I remained I would no doubt hear for myself. But they had even greatly disturbed the good cura, despite the fact that he was under the direct protection of God. The señor had come, so his ravings indicated, from a haunted place—no less a place, the innkeeper whispered crossing himself again, than the shunned Cordillera de Carabaya, which every one knew was filled with evil spirits. Yes, evil spirits which would not lightly give up any one who had once been in their power!

And, in fine, the idea seemed to be that some of these demons of the Cordillera—about which, as a matter of fact, I had heard some strange tales—might come at any time for the sick man. If they did, they would be more apt to wreak their fury on one of the señor's own countrymen—specially if he was in the same room. The keeper of the posada did not put it that way, of course; he said that

one of his own people was better qualified to protect the señor in such case than any strangers were. Nevertheless the theory plainly was that if I stayed I would act as a lightning rod for any levin of hell that might strike!

I went to the room of the sick man. At first glance I could see that here was no andrine, no mountain vagabond. Neither fever nor scrub beard could hide the fineness, the sensitivity, the intelligence of the face on which I looked. He was, I judged, about thirty, and he was an ill case indeed. His temperature showed 105 point six. At the moment he was in delirium.

My first shock of surprise came when I examined his wound. It seemed to me more like the stab of some great bird beak than the work of spear or arrow. It was a puncture—or better, perhaps, a punch—clear through the muscles of the back and left shoulder and base of the neck. It had missed the arteries of the last by the narrowest of margins. I knew of no bird which could make such a wound as this, yet the closer I looked and probed the more sure I was that it had been inflicted by no weapon of man.

That night, after I had arranged my own matters and had him sleeping under a hypodermic, I opened up his saddlebags. Papers in them showed his name to be Nicholas Graydon, a mining engineer, a graduate of the Harvard School of Mines, his birthplace, Philadelphia. There was a diary that revealed so much of him truly likable that had I not already made up my mind to stop on with him it would have impelled me to do so. Its last entry was dated about a month before and ran:

Two weeks now since our arrieros deserted us, and we seem to be pretty thoroughly lost. Effects upon the three are curious. Sterrett manages to keep himself evenly drunk all the time. That spare burro of his must be loaded with nothing but that Indian hell-brew. Dancré is moody and sullen. Soames seems to have developed a morbid suspicion of everyone. Strange how the wilderness, the jungle, the desert, bring out the latent man in all of us. In Quito none of the three was half bad. But now—well, the luckiest thing for me will be for us to find no

treasure. If we do, my throat will probably be the first to be cut.

Further down in the bag were two parcels, each most carefully and securely wrapped. Opening the first I found a long black feather oddly marked with white. I did not recognize the plume as belonging to any bird I knew. Its shaft was inlaid with little bands of gold, altogether a curiously delicate bit of goldsmith's work.

But the contents of the second package make me gasp with amazement. It was a golden bracelet, clearly exceedingly ancient, the band an inch broad and expanding into an oval disk perhaps three inches long by two wide. That disk held in high relief the most extraordinary bit of carving I had ever seen. Four monsters held on uplifted paws, a disk on which lay coiled a serpent with a woman's face and woman's breasts. Nor had I ever beheld such suggestion of united wisdom and weirdness as the maker had stamped upon the snake woman's face.

Yet it was not that which called forth the full measure of my wonder; no. There are certain pictures, certain sculptures, certain works of art which carry to their beholders conviction that no fantasy, no imagination, went into their making and that they are careful, accurate copies of something seen by those who made them. This carving carried that conviction.

The four monsters which held up the snake woman were—dinosaurs!

There was no mistaking them. I had examined too many of the reconstructions made by scientists from the fossil bones of these gigantic, monstrous reptilian creatures to be in error. But these giants were supposed to have died off millions of years before man first appeared on earth! Yet here they were, carved with such fidelity to detail, such impress of photographic accuracy, that it was impossible to believe that the ancient goldsmith who made this thing had not had before him living models! Marveling, I held the bracelet closer to the light and, as I did so, I thought I heard far away in the blackness of those high mountains a sound like a tiny bugle. In that note there was something profoundly, alienly weird. I went to the window and listened, but the sound

did not come again. I turned to find the eyes of Graydon opened and regarding me. For a moment he had slipped from the thrall of the fever—and the thought came to me that it had been that elfin bugling which had awakened him.

It was six weeks before I had Graydon well out of danger. And in that time he had told me bit by bit that well nigh incredible experience of his in the haunted hills of the Cordillera de Carabaya and what it was that had sent him so far down into the valley of the shadow.

Three years it has been since then. Three years and I have heard nothing of him. Three years and he has not returned from his journey back to the Cordillera de Carabaya where he went to seek mystery, ancient beyond all memory of man, he believed was hidden there. But more than that—to seek Suarra.

"If you don't hear from me in three years, tell the story and let the people who knew me know what became of me," he said, as I left him at the beginning of that strange trail he had determined to retrace.

And so I tell it, reconstructing it from his reticences as well as his confidences, since only so, may a full measure of judgment of that story be gained.

CHAPTER 2

Suarra

GRAYDON had run into Sterrett in Quito. Or, rather, Sterrett sought him out there. Graydon had often heard of the giant West Coast adventurer, but their trails had never crossed. It was with a lively curiosity, then, that he opened the door of his room to this visitor.

And he had rather liked Sterrett. There was a bluff directness about the big man that made him overlook a certain cruelty of eye and a touch of brutality about mouth and jaw.

Sterrett came to the point at once. Graydon had no doubt heard the story of the treasure train which had been brought to Pizarro, the ransom of the Inca Atahualpa? And learning of the murder of that monarch had turned back and buried that treasure somewhere in the Peruvian

wilderness? Graydon had heard of it, hundreds of times. And, like every other adventurer in the Andes, spent a little time himself searching for those countless millions in jewels and gold.

Sterrett nodded.

"I know how to find it," he said.

And Graydon had laughed. How many had told me that they, too, knew where lay hidden that hoard of Atahualpa the Inca!

But in the end Sterrett convinced him; convinced him at least that there was something more solid than usual in his story, something decidedly worth looking into.

There would be two others in the expedition, Sterrett told him, both men long associated with him. One was Dancré, a Frenchman, the other an American named Soames. These two had been with Sterrett when he had got hold of the old parchment with its alleged map of the treasure trail, and with its carefully drawn signs that purported to be copies of those along that trail; signs cut by its makers to guide those who one day, when the Spaniard was gone, would set out to recover the hidden hoard.

Graydon asked why they wanted him. Sterrett bluntly enough told him—because he was an American; because they knew he could be trusted; because he could afford to pay half the expenses of the expedition. He, Dancré and Soames would pay the other half. They would all share equally if the treasure was found. Still another reason, Graydon was a mining engineer and his special knowledge might be essential when it came to recovering the stuff. Furthermore, if the treasure was not found, the region where they were going was full of minerals. He might make some valuable discoveries. In which event all would share equally as before.

There were no calls on Graydon at the time. It was true that he could well afford the cost. At the worst there would be adventure and some pleasant excitement. He met Dancré and Soames, the first a cynical but amusing little bunch of wires and nerves, the second a lanky, saturnine, hardbitten Yankee. They had gone down by rail to Cerro de Pasco for their outfit, that being the town of any size closest to

where, according to the map, their trail into the wilderness began. A week later, with eight burros and six arrieros or packmen, they were well within the welter of peaks through which the old map indicated their road lay.

They found the signs cut in the rocks exactly as the parchment had promised. Gay, spirits high with anticipation, three of them at least spending in advance their share of the treasure, they followed the symbols. Steadily they were led into the uncharted wilderness.

At last the arrieros began to murmur. They were approaching, they said, a region that was accursed, the Cordillera de Carabaya, where demons dwelt and only fierce Aymaras, their servants, lived. Promises of more money, threats, pleadings, took them along a little farther.

Then one morning the four awoke to find the arrieros gone—and with them half the burros and a portion of their supplies.

They pressed on. Then suddenly, the signs had failed them. Either they had lost the trail, or there were no more carven symbols and the parchment which had led them truthfully so far had lied at the last. Or was it possible that the signs had been obliterated—cut away?

The country into which they had penetrated was a strangely deserted one. They saw no sign of Indians—had seen none indeed since when, more than a week before, they had stopped at a Quicha village and Sterrett had got mad drunk on that fiery spirit the Quichas distill. Food, too, was curiously hard to find, there were few animals and fewer birds.

But worst of all was the change that had come over his companions. As high as they had been lifted by their certainty of success, just so deep were they now cast into despair. The wilderness, the loneliness of it, their disappointment, had brought about the real man that lies hidden beneath the veneer all of us carry. Sterrett kept himself at a steady level of drunkenness, alternately quarrelsome and noisy or sunk in a sullen mood of brooding, brutal rage. Dancré had become silent and irritable. Soames seemed to have reached the conclusion that Graydon, Sterrett and the Frenchman had combined against him; that they had either de-

liberately missed the trail or had erased the signs. Only when the two of them joined Sterrett and drank with the Quicha hell-brew did either of them relax. At such times Graydon had the uneasy feeling that his life might be hanging on a thin thread.

On the day that his adventure really began—that strange adventure to which all that had passed before had been a prelude—Graydon was coming back to camp. He had been hunting since morning. Dancré and Soames had gone off together on another desperate search for the missing symbols that would lead them to the treasure trail again.

CUT off in mid-flight, the girl's cry came to him as the answer to all his apprehensions; materialization of the menace toward which his vague fears had been groping ever since he had left Sterrett alone at the camp hours ago. He had sensed some culminating misfortune close—and here it was! He knew it; how, he did not stop himself to ask; he was sure. He broke into a run, stumbling up the slope to the group of gray green algarroba trees where the tent was pitched.

What had the drunken fool done? Graydon had warned them all that their situation was perilous; that if Indians came they must try to make friends with them—that they must be superlatively careful in their treatment of any Indian women.

He reached the algarrobas; crashed through the light undergrowth to the little clearing. Why didn't the girl cry out again, he wondered. There was a sickness at his heart. A low chuckle reached him, thick, satyr toned. Then Sterrett's voice, cruel mocking!

"No more fight in you, eh? Well, which'll it be, pretty lady—the way to the gold or you? And by Heaven—I guess it'll be you—first!"

For an instant Graydon paused. He saw that Sterrett, half crouching, was holding the girl bow fashion over one knee. A thick arm was clinched about her neck, the fingers clutching her mouth brutally, silencing her; his right had fettered her slender wrists; her knees were caught in the vise of his bent right leg.

She was helpless, but as Graydon sprang forward he caught a flash of wide

black eyes, wrath filled and defiant, staring fearlessly into those leering so close.

He caught Sterrett by the hair, locked an arm under his chin, drawing his head sharply back.

"Drop her!" he ordered. "Drop her—quick!"

Sterrett hurled himself to his feet, dropping the girl as he rose.

"What the hell are you butting in for?" he snarled. His hand struck down toward his pistol. But even while the fingers were tightening around the butt, Graydon's fist shot out and caught him on the point of the hairy jaw. The clutching fingers loosened, the half drawn pistol slipped to the ground, the great body quivered and toppled over. Long before it fell the girl had leaped up and away.

Graydon did not look after her. She had gone no doubt to bring down upon them her people, some tribe of those fierce Aymaras that even the Incas of old had never quite conquered and who would avenge her—in ways that Graydon did not like to visualize.

He bent down over Sterrett. His heart was beating; feebly it was true—but beating. The reek of drink was sickening. Graydon's hand touched the fallen pistol. He picked it up and looked speculatively at the fallen man's rifle. Sterrett, between the blow and the drink, would probably be out of the running for hours. He wished that Dancré and Soames would get back soon to camp. The three of them could put up a good fight at any rate; might even have a chance for escape. So ran his thoughts. But Dancré and Soames would have to return quickly. The girl would soon be there—with the avengers; no doubt at this very moment she was telling them of her wrongs. He turned—

She stood there, looking at him!

And drinking in her loveliness, Graydon forgot the man at his feet; forgot all, and was content to let his soul sit undisturbed within his eyes and take its delight to her.

Her skin was palest ivory. It gleamed translucent through the rents of the soft amber fabric like the thickest silk that swathed her. Her eyes were deep velvety pool, oval, a little tilted; Egyptian in the wide midnight of their irises. But the features were classic, cameo; the nose

small and straight, the brows level and black, almost meeting above it!

And her hair was cloudy jet, misty and shadowed, and a narrow fillet of gold around the broad, low forehead. In it like a diamond were entwined the sable and silver feathers of the caraqueñue, that bird whose plumage in lost centuries was sacred to the princesses of the Incas alone. Above her dimpled elbows golden bracelets twined, reaching to the slender shoulders. The little, high arched feet were shod with high buskins of deerskin.

She was light and slender as the Willow Maid who waits on Kwannon when she passes into the World of Trees to pour into them new fire of green life—and like the Willow Maid green fire of tree and jungle and flame of woman gleamed with her.

Nothing so exquisite, so beautiful had ever Graydon beheld. Here was no Aymara, no daughter of any tribe of the Cordilleras, no descendant of Incas. Nor was she Spanish. There were bruises on her cheeks—the marks of Sterrett's cruel fingers. Her long, slim hands touched them. The red lips opened. She spoke—in the Aymara tongue.

"Is he dead?" she asked—her voice was low, a faint chime as of little bells ringing through it.

"No," Graydon answered.

In the depths of the midnight eyes a small hot flame flared; he could have sworn it was of gladness; it vanished as swiftly as it had come.

"That is well," she said. "I would not have him die—" the voice became meditative—"so!"

"Who are you?" Graydon asked wonderingly. She looked at him for a long moment, enigmatically.

"Call me—Suarra," she answered at last.

Sterrett stirred; groaned. The girl gazed down upon him. The slim hand touched once more the bruises on her cheek.

"He is very strong," she murmured.

Graydon thought there was admiration in the voice; wondered whether all that delectable beauty was after all but a mask for primitive woman, worshiping brute strength; looked into the eyes scanning Sterrett's bulk, noted the curious specula-

tion within them, and knew that whatever the reason for her comment it was not that which his fleeting thought had whispered. She looked at him, questioningly.

"Are you his enemy?" she asked.

"No," said Graydon, "we travel together."

"Then why," she pointed to the outstretched figure, "why did you do this to him? Why did you not let him have his way with me?"

Graydon flushed, uncomfortably. The question, with all its subtle implications, cut. What kind of a beast did she think him? His defense of her had been elementary—as well be asked to explain why he did not stand by and watch idly while a child was being murdered!

"What do you think I am?" His voice shook with half shamed wrath. "No man stands by and lets a thing like that go on."

She looked at him, curiously; but her eyes had softened.

"No?" she asked. "No man does? Then what is he?"

Graydon found no answer. She took a step closer to him, her slim fingers again touching the bruises on her cheek.

"Do you not wonder," she said—"now do you not wonder why I do not call my people to deal him the punishment he has earned?"

"I do wonder," Graydon's perplexity was frank. "I wonder indeed. Why do you not call them—if they are close enough to hear?"

"And what would you do were they to come?" she whispered.

"I would not let them have him—alive," he answered. "Nor me!"

"Perhaps," she said, slowly, "perhaps—knowing that—is why—I do not call them!"

Suddenly she smiled upon him—and it was as though a draft of wild sweet wine had been lifted to his lips. He took a swift step toward her. She drew up to her slim lithe height, thrust out a warning hand.

"I am—Suarra," she said, then, "and I am—Death!"

AN ODD chill passed through Graydon. Again he realized the unfamiliar, the alien beauty of her. Was there

truth after all in those legends of the haunted Cordillera? He had never doubted that there was something behind the terror of the Indians, the desertion of the arrieros. Was she one of its spirits, its—demons? For an instant the fantasy seemed no fantasy. Then reason returned. This girl a demon! He laughed.

She frowned at that laughter.

"Do not laugh," she said. "The death I mean is not such as you who live beyond the high rim of our land may know. It is death that blots out not alone the body, but that lord whose castle is the body; that which looks out through the windows of your eyes—that presence, that flame you believe can never die. That, too, our death blots out; makes as though it never had been. Or letting it live, changes it in—dreadful—ways. Yet, because you came to me in my need—nay, more because of something I sense within you—something that calls out to me and to which I must listen and do desire to listen—because of this I would not have that death come to you."

Strange as were her words, Graydon hardly heard them; certainly did not then realize fully their meaning, lost still as he was in wonder.

What was this girl doing here in these wild mountains with her bracelets of gold and the royal Inca feather on her lovely little head? No demon of the wilderness, she! Absurd! She was living, desirable, all human.

Yet she was of no race he knew. Despite the caraqueque plumes—not of the Incas.

But she was of pure blood—the blood of kings. Yes, that was it—a princess of some proud empire, immemorably ancient, long lost! But what empire?

"How you came by the watchers, I do not know. How you passed unseen by them I do not know. Nor how you came so far within this forbidden land. Tell me," her voice was imperious, "why came you here at all?"

Graydon stirred. It was a command.

"We came here from afar," he said, "on the track of a great treasure of gold and gems; the treasure of Atahualpa, the Inca. There were certain signs that led us. They brought us here. And here we lost them—and got lost ourselves."

"Atahualpa," she nodded. "Yes, his people did come here. We took them—and their treasure!"

Graydon stared at her, jaw dropping in amazement.

"Yes," she nodded, indifferently, "it lies somewhere in one of the thirteen caves. It was nothing to us—to us of Yu-Atlanchi where treasures are as the sands in the stream bed. A grain of sand, it was, among many. But the people of Atahualpa were welcome—since we needed new folks to care for the Xinli and to nourish the great wisdom of the Snake Mother."

"The Snake Mother!" exclaimed Graydon.

The girl touched the bracelet on her right arm. And Graydon, looking close, saw that this bracelet held a disk on which was carved a serpent with a woman's head and woman's breasts and arms. It lay coiled upon a great dish held high on the paws of four animals. The shapes of these did not at once register upon his consciousness—so absorbed was he in his study of that coiled figure.

And now he saw that this was not really that of a woman. It was reptilian. But so strongly had the maker feminized it, so great was the suggestion of womanhood modeled into every line of it, that constantly the eyes saw it as woman, forgetting all that was of the serpent.

Her eyes were of some small, glittering, intensely purple stone. And as Graydon looked he felt that those eyes were alive—that far, far away some living thing was looking at him through them. That they were, in fact, prolongations of some one's—some thing's—vision!

And suddenly the figure seemed to swell, the coils to move, the eyes come closer.

He tore his gaze away; drew back, dizzily.

The girl was touching one of the animals that held up the bowl or shield or whatever it was that held the snake woman.

"The Xinli," she said.

Graydon looked; looked and felt increase of bewilderment. For he knew what those animals were. And, knowing, knew that he looked upon the incredible.

They were dinosaurs! Those gigantic,

monstrous grotesques that ruled earth millions upon millions of years ago, and but for whose extinction, so he had been taught, man could never have developed.

Who in this Andean wilderness could know or could have known the dinosaur? Who here could have carved the monsters with such life-like details as these possessed? Why, it was only yesterday that science had learned what really were their huge bones, buried so long that the rocks had molded themselves around them in adamantine matrix. And laboriously, with every modern resource still haltingly and laboriously, science had set those bones together as a perplexed child a picture puzzle, and timidly put forth what it believed to be reconstructions of these long vanished chimeras of earth's nightmare youth.

Yet here, far from all science it must surely be, some one had modeled those same monsters for a woman's bracelet. Why then, it followed that whoever had done this must have had before him the living forms from which to work. Or, if not, copies of those forms set down accurately by ancient men who had seen them. And either or both these things were incredible.

What were these people to whom this girl belonged? People who—what was it she had said—could blot out both body and soul, or change the soul to some dreadful thing? There had been a name—Yu-Atlanchi.

"Suarra," he said, "where is Yu-Atlanchi? Is it this place where we are now?"

"This," she laughed. "No! Yu-Atlanchi is the ancient land. The hidden land where the Five Lords and the Lord of Lords once ruled, and where now rules only the Lord of Fate and the Lord of Folly and the Snake Mother! This place Yu-Atlanchi!" again she laughed. "Now and then we hunt here—with the Xinli and the—the—" she hesitated, looking at him oddly; then went on. "So it was that he," she pointed to Sterrett, "caught me. I was hunting. I had slipped away from my—my—" again she hesitated, as oddly as before—"my followers, for sometimes I would hunt alone, wander alone. I came through these trees and saw your tetuane, your lodge. I came face to face with—him. And I was amazed—too amazed to

strike with one of these." She pointed to a low knoll a few feet away. "So, before I could conquer that amaze he seized me, choked me. And then you came."

Gradyon stared at the place where she had pointed. There upon the ground lay three slender shining spears. Their slim shafts were of gold; the arrow shaped heads of two of them were of fine opal.

But the third—the third was a single emerald, translucent and flawless, all of six inches long and three at its widest and ground to keenest point and cutting edge!

THREE it lay, a priceless jewel tipping a spear of gold—and a swift panic shook Graydon. He had forgotten Soames and Dancré! Suppose they should return while this girl was there! This girl with her ornaments of gold, her gem tipped golden spears, and her—beauty! Well, her knew what they could do. And while now he knew, too, how with all his wit and strength he would fight for her. Still they were two and armed and cunning, and he only one.

Suddenly he discounted all that tale of hers of a hidden land with its Lords and Snake Mother and its people who dealt out mysterious unfamiliar deaths. If this were all, so why had she come alone into the algarobas? Why was she still alone? As suddenly he saw her only a girl, speaking fantasy, and helpless.

"Suarra," he said, "you must go and go quickly. This man and I are not all. There are two more and even now they may be close. Take your spears, and go quickly. Else I may not be able to save you."

"You think I am—" she began.

"I tell you to go," he answered. "Whoever you are, whatever you are, go now and keep away from this place. Tomorrow I will try to lead them back. If you have people to fight for you—well, let them come and fight if you so desire. But this instant take your spears and go."

She crossed to the little knoll and slowly picked them up. She held one out to him, the one that bore the emerald point.

"This," she said, "to remember—Suarra."

"No," he thrust it back. "No!"

Once the others saw that jewel never, he knew, would he be able to start them on

the back trail—if they could find it. Sterrett had seen it, of course, but that was not like having it in the camp, a constant reminder to Soames and Dancré of what might be unlimited riches within their reach. And he might be able to convince those others that Sterrett's story was but a drunken dream.

The girl regarded him meditatively, a quickened interest in the velvety eyes. She slipped the golden bracelets from her arms, held them out to him with the three spears.

"Will you take all of them—and leave your comrades?" she asked. "Here are gold and gems. They are treasures. They are what you have been seeking. Take them. Take them and go, leaving that man there and those other two. Consent—and I will not only give you these, but show you a way out of this forbidden land."

For a moment Graydon hesitated. The great emerald alone was worth a fortune. What loyalty did he owe after all, to Sterrett and Soames and Dancré? And Sterrett had brought this upon himself.

Nevertheless—they were his comrades. Open eyed he had gone into this venture with them.

He had a swift vision of himself skulking away with this glittering, golden booty, creeping off to safety while he left them, unwarmed, unprepared to meet—what? Peril, certainly; nay, almost as certainly—death. For whatever the present danger of this girl might be at the hands of his comrades, subconsciously Graydon knew that it must be but a brief one; that she could not be all alone; that although through some chance she had strayed upon the camp, somewhere close were those who would seek for her when they missed her. That somewhere were forces on which she could call and against which it was unlikely three men, even well armed as they were, could prevail.

Very definitely he did not like that picture of himself skulking away from the peril, whatever it might be.

"No," he said. "These men are of my race, my comrades. Whatever is to come—I will meet it with them and help them fight it. Now go."

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"Yet you would have fought them for my sake—indeed did fight," she said, as though perplexed. "Why then do you cling to them when you can save yourself; go free, with treasure? And why, if you will not do this, do you let me go, knowing that if you kept me prisoner, or—slew me, I could not bring my people down upon you?"

Graydon laughed.

"I couldn't let them hurt you, of course," he said, "and I'm afraid to make you prisoner, because I might not be able to keep you free from hurt. And I won't run away. So talk no more, but go—go quickly!"

She thrust the gleaming spears into the ground, slipped the golden bracelets back on her arms, held white hands out to him.

"Now," she cried, "now, by the Wisdom of the Snake Mother, by the Five Lords and by the Lord of Lords, I will save you if I can. All that I have tempted you with was but to test that truth which I had hoped was in you and now know is within you. Now you may not go back—nor may they. Here is Yu-Atlanchi and Yu-Atlanchi's power. Into that power you have strayed. Nor have those who have ever so strayed ever escaped. Yet you I will save—if I can!"

Before he could answer her he heard a horn sound; far away and high in air it seemed. Faintly it was answered by others closer by; mellow, questing notes—yet with weirdly alien beat in them that subtly checked the pulse of Graydon's heart!

"They come," she said. "My followers! Light your fire tonight. Sleep without fear. But do not wander beyond those trees!"

"Suarra—" he cried.

"Silence now," she warned. "Silence—until I am gone!"

The mellow horns sounded closer. She sprang from his side; darted through the trees.

From the little ridge above the camp he heard her voice raised in one clear, ringing shout. There was tumult of the horns about her—elfinly troubling. Then silence.

Graydon stood listening. The sun touched the high snowfields of the majestic peaks toward which he faced; touched

them and turned them into robes of molten gold. The amethyst shadows that draped their sides thickened, wavered and marched swiftly forward.

Still he listened, scarce breathing.

Far, far away the horns sounded again; faint echoings of the tumult that had swept about Suarra—faint, faint and faerie sweet.

The sun dropped behind the peaks; the edges of their frozen mantles glittered as though dews with diamonds; darkened into a fringe of gleaming rubies. The golden fields dulled, grew amber and then blushed forth a glowing rose. They changed to pearl and faded into a ghostly silver, shining like cloud wraiths in the highest heavens. Down upon the algarroba clump the quick Andean dusk fell.

And not till then did Graydon, shivering with sudden, inexplicable dread, realize that beyond the calling horns and the girl's clear shouting he had heard no other sound—no noise either of man or beast, no sweeping through of brush or grass, no fall of running feet nor clamor of the chase.

Nothing but that mellow chorus of the horns!

From infinite distances, it seemed to him, he heard one single note, sustained and insistent. It detached itself from the silence. It swept toward him with the speed of light. It circled overhead, hovered and darted; arose and sped away; a winged sound bearing some message, carrying some warning—where?

CHAPTER 3

The Eyes of the Snake Mother

GRAYDON turned back. He bent over Sterrett, who had drifted out of the paralysis of the blow into a drunken stupor. There were deep scratches on the giant's cheeks—the marks of Suarra's nails. The jaw was badly swollen where he had hit it. Graydon dragged him over to the tent, thrust a knapsack under his head and threw a blanket over him. Then he went out and built up the fire.

Hardly had he begun to prepare the supper when he heard a trampling through the underbrush. Soon Soames

and Dancré came up through the trees.

"Find any signs?" he asked them.

"Signs? Hell—no!" snarled the New Englander. "Say, Graydon, did you hear something like a lot of horns? Damned queer horns, too. They seemed to be over here."

Graydon nodded, abstractedly. Abruptly he realized that he must tell these men what had happened, must warn them and urge them to prepare for defense. But how much should he tell?

All?

Tell them of Suarra's beauty, of her golden ornaments and her gem tipped spears of gold? Tell them what she had said of Atahualpa's treasure and of that ancient Yu-Atlanchi where priceless gems were "thick as the sands upon the bed of a stream?"

Well he knew that if he did there would be no further reasoning with them; that they would go berserk with greed. Yet something of it he must tell them if they were to be ready for the assault which he was certain would come with the dawn.

And of Suarra they would learn soon enough from Sterrett when he awakened.

He heard an exclamation from Dancré who had passed on into the tent; heard him come out; stood up and faced the wiry little Frenchman.

"What's the matter wit' Sterrett, eh?" Dancré snapped. "First I thought he's drunk. Then I see he's scratched like wild cat and wit' a lump on his jaw as big as one orange. What you do to Sterrett, eh?"

Graydon had made up his mind; was ready to answer.

"Dancré," he said, "Soames—we're in a bad box. I came in from hunting less than an hour ago and found Sterrett wrestling with a girl. That's bad medicine down here—the worst, and you two know it. I had to knock Sterrett out before I could get the girl away from him. Her people will probably be after us in the morning. There's no use trying to get away. They'll soon enough find us in this wilderness of which we know nothing and they presumably know all. This place is as good as any other to meet them. And it's a better place than any if we have to fight. We'd better spend the night getting it ready so we can put up a good one,

if we have to—I'm sure we will."

"A girl, eh?" said Dancré. "What she look like? Where she come from? How she get away?"

Graydon chose the last question to answer.

"I let her go," he said.

"You let her go!" snarled Soames, "What the hell did you do that for, man? Why didn't you tie her up? We could have held her as a hostage, Graydon—had something to do some trading with when her damned bunch of Indians came."

"She wasn't an Indian, Soames," began Graydon, then hesitated.

"You mean she was white—Spanish?" broke in Dancré, incredulously.

"Not Spanish either. She was white. Yes, white as any of us. I don't know what she was," answered Graydon.

The pair stared at him, then at each other.

"There's something damned funny about this," growled Soames, at last. "But what I want to know is why you let her go, whatever the hell she was?"

"Because I thought we'd have a better chance if I did than if I didn't." Graydon's own wrath was rising. "I want to tell you two that we're up against something mighty bad; something none of us knows anything about. And we've got just one chance of getting out of the mess. If I'd kept her here we wouldn't have even that chance."

He halted. Dancré had stopped; had picked up something from the ground, something that gleamed yellow in the fire-light. And now the Frenchman nudged the lank New Englander.

"Somet'ing funny is right, Soames," he said. "Look at this."

He handed the gleaming object over. Graydon saw that it was a thin golden bracelet, and as Soames turned it over in his hand he caught the green glitter of emeralds. It had been torn from Suarra's arm, he realized, in her struggle with Sterrett.

"Yes, somet'ing funny!" repeated Dancré. He glared at Graydon venomously, through slitted lids. "What that girl give you to let her go, Graydon, eh?" he spat. "What she tell you, eh?"

Soames' hand dropped to his automatic.

"She gave me nothing, I took nothing,"

answered Graydon, facing them steadily.

"I t'ink you damned liar!" said Dancré, viciously. "We get Sterrett awake," he turned to Soames. "We get him awake quick. I t'ink he tell us more about this, oui. A girl who wears stuff like this—and he lets her go! Lets her go when he knows there must be more where this come from, eh, Soames? Damned funny is right, eh? Come, now, we see what Sterrett tell us."

Graydon watched them go into the tent. Soon Soames came out, went to a spring that bubbled up from among the trees; returned, with water.

Well, let them waken Sterrett; let him tell them whatever he could. They would not kill him that night, of that he was sure. They believed that he knew too much. And in the morning—

What was hidden in the morning for them all?

That even now they were prisoners, Graydon did not doubt. Suarra's warning not to leave the camp had been too explicit. And since that tumult of the elfin horns, her swift vanishing and the silence that had followed he had no longer doubt that they had strayed as she had said within the grasp of some power, formidable as it was mysterious.

The silence? Suddenly it came to him that the night had become strangely still. There was no sound either of insect or bird nor any stirring of the familiar after-twilight life of the wilderness.

HE STRODE away, through the Algarroba clump. There was a scant score of the trees. They stood up like a little leafy island peak within the brush covered savannah. They were great trees, every one of them, and set with a curious regularity as though they had not sprung up by chance; as though indeed they had been carefully planted.

Graydon reached the last of them, rested a hand against the bole that looked like myriads of tiny grubs turned to soft brown wood. He peered out. The slope that lay before him was flooded with moonlight; the yellow blooms of the chilca shrubs that pressed to the very feet of the trees shone wanly in the silver flood. The faintly aromatic fragrance of the quenuar stole around him. Movement or sign of life

there was none in the still wilderness.

And yet—

The spaces seemed filled with watchers; he felt their gaze upon him; knew with an absolute certainty that some hidden host girdled the camp. He scanned every bush and shadow; saw nothing. Nevertheless the certainty of a hidden, unseen multitude persisted. A wave of nervous irritation passed through him. He would force them, whatever they were, to show themselves.

He stepped boldly into the full moonlight.

On the instant the silence intensified; seemed to draw taut; to lift itself up whole octaves of stillnesses; to become alert, expectant—as though poised to spring upon him should he take one step further!

A coldness wrapped him, a shudder shook him. He drew swiftly back to the shadow of the trees; stood there, his heart beating furiously. The silence lost its poignancy, dropped back upon its haunches—but watchful and alert!

What had frightened him? What was there in that tightening of the stillness that had touched him with the finger of nightmare terror?

Trembling, he groped back, foot by foot, afraid to turn his back to the silence. Behind him the fire flared. And suddenly his fear dropped from him.

His reaction from the panic was a heady recklessness. He threw a log upon the fire and laughed as the sparks shot up among the leaves. Soames, coming out of the tent for more water, stopped as he heard that laughter and scowled at him malevolently.

"Laugh," he said. "Laugh while you can—you damned traitor. You'll laugh on the other side of your mouth when we get Sterrett up and he tells us what he knows."

"That was a sound sleep I gave him, anyway," jeered Graydon.

"There are sounder sleeps! Don't forget it." It was Dancré's voice, cold and menacing from within the tent. He heard Sterrett groan.

Graydon turned his back to the tent and deliberately faced that silence from which he had just fled. How long he sat thus he did not know. It could not have been for long. But all at once he was



Beautiful she was though terrible—this serpent woman with hair of spun silver. . . .

aware that he was staring straight into two little points of vivid light that seemed at once far, far away and very close. They were odd, he thought. What was it so odd about them? Was it their color? They were purple, a curiously intense purple. As he stared, it seemed to him that they grew larger, but the puzzling double aspect of distance and nearness did not alter.

It was very curious, he thought. He had seen two eyes—yes, they were eyes—of that peculiar purple somewhere, not long ago. But he could not remember just where—there was a drowsiness clouding his thought. He would look at them no more. He raised his gaze, slowly and with perceptible effort, to the leafy screen above him. Unwinkingly the brilliant orbs stared back at him from it. He forced his gaze downward. There, too, they were.

And now he knew them—the eyes that had glittered from Suarra's bracelet of the dinosaurs! The eyes of that mingled serpent and woman she had called the Snake Mother!

They were drawing him—drawing him—

He realized that his lids had closed; yet, closing they had not shut out the globes of vivid purple. His lethargy increased, but was of the body, not of the mind. All his consciousness had concentrated, been gathered, into the focus of the weird, invading eyes.

Abruptly they retreated. And like line streaming out of a reel the consciousness of Graydon streamed out of him and after them—out of his body, out of the camp, through the grove and out into the land beyond!

It seemed to him that he passed swiftly over the moonlit wastes. They flashed beneath him, unrolling like panorama under racing plane. Ahead of him frowned a black barrier. It shrouded him and was gone. He had a glimpse of a wide, circular valley rimmed by sky-piercing peaks; towering scarps of rock. There was the silver glint of a lake, the liquid silver of a mighty torrent pouring out of the heart of a precipice. He caught, wheeling, sight of carved colossi, gigantic shapes that sat bathed in the milky flood of the moon guarding each the mouth of a cavern.

A city rushed up to meet him, a city

ruby roofed and opal turreted and fantastic as though built by jinn out of the stuff of dreams.

And then it seemed to him that he came to rest with a vast and columned hall from whose high roof fell beams of soft and dimly azure light. High arose those columns, unfolding far above into wide wondrous petalings of opal and of emerald and turquoise flecked with gold.

Before him were the eyes that in this dream—if dream it were—had drawn him to this place. And as the consciousness which was he and yet had, he knew, neither visible shape nor shadow, beheld it, it recoiled, feeling terror of the unknown; struggled to make its way back to the body from which it had been lured; fluttered like a serpent trapped bird; at last, like the bird, gave itself up to the serpent fascination.

For Graydon looked upon—the Snake Mother!

She lay just beyond the lip of a wide alcove set high above the pillared floor. Between her and him the azure beams fell, curtaining the great niche with a misty radiance that half-shadowed; half-revealed her.

Her face was ageless, neither young nor old; she came to him—free from time forever, free from the etching acid of the years. She might have been born yesterday or a million years ago. Her eyes, set wide apart, were round and luminous; they were living jewels filled with purple fires. Above them rose her forehead wide and high and sloping sharply back. The nose was long and delicate, the nostrils dilated; the chin small and pointed.

The mouth was small, too, and heart shaped and the lips a scarlet flame.

DOWN her narrow, childlike shoulders flowed hair that gleamed like spun silver. The shining argent strands arrow-headed into a point upon her forehead; coifed, they gave to her face that same heart shape in which her lips were molded, a heart of which the chin was the tip.

She had high little breasts, uptilted. And face and neck, shoulders and breasts were the hue of pearls suffused faintly with rose; and like rosy pearls they glistened.

Below her breasts began her—coils!

Mistily Graydon saw them, half buried in a nest of silken cushions—thick coils and many, circle upon circle of them, covered with great heart shaped scales; glimmering and palely gleaming; each scale as exquisitely wrought as though by elfin jeweler; each opaline, nacreous; mother-of-pearl.

Her pointed chin was cupped in hands, tiny as a baby's; like a babe's were her slender arms, their dimpled elbows resting on her topmost coil.

And on that face which was neither woman's nor serpent's but subtly both—and more, far more than either—on that ageless face sat side by side and hand in hand a spirit of wisdom that was awesome and a spirit weary beyond thought!

Graydon forgot his terror. He paid homage to her beauty; for beautiful she was though terrible—this serpent woman with hair of spun silver, her face and breasts of rosy pearls, her jeweled and shimmering coils, her eyes of purple fire and her lips of living flame. A lesser homage he paid her wisdom. And he pitied her for her burden of weariness.

Fear of her he had none.

Instantly he knew that she had read all his thought; knew, too, that he had pleased her. The scarlet lips half parted in a smile—almost she preened herself! A slender red and pointed tongue flicked out and touched her scarlet lips. The tiny hands fell; she raised her head; up from her circled coils lifted and swayed a pearly pillar bearing that head aloft, slowly, sinuously, foot by foot until it paused twice the height of a tall man over the floor, twisting, it turned its face to the alcove.

Graydon, following the movement, saw that the alcove was tenanted. Within it was a throne—a throne that was as though carved from the heart of a colossal sapphire. It was oval, ten feet or more in height, and hollowed like a shrine. It rested upon or was set within the cupped end of a thick pillar of some substance resembling milky rock crystal. It was empty, so far as he could see, but around it clung a faint radiance. At its foot were five lesser thrones, low and with broad table-like seats. They were arranged in a semi-circle. The throne at the right end of this semi-circle was red as though

carved from ruby; the throne at the left was black as though cut from jet; the three central thrones were red gold.

The black throne and red throne and middle throne of red gold were empty. In each of the other two a figure sat, cross-legged and squatting and swathed from feet to chin in silken robes of blue and gold. Incredibly old were the faces of the pair, the stamp of lost aeons deep upon them—except their eyes.

Their eyes were young; as incredibly young as their settings were ancient. And incredibly—alive! And those vital, youthful eyes were reading him; the minds behind them were weighing him; judging him. Judging him—with what purpose?

Floated through Graydon's mind—or whatever it was of him that hovered there in dream or in spell or in obedience to laws unknown to the science of his world—the memory of Suarra's vow. By the Wisdom of the Snake Mother, and by the Five Lords and by the Lord of Lords she had sworn to save him if she could.

Why—these must be they, the two Lords she had told him still lived in Yu-Atlanchi! Certainly there was the Snake Mother. And that sapphire throne of luminous mystery must be the seat of the Lord of Lords—whatever he might be.

That fantastic city that had raced upward to enfold him was—Yu-Atlanchi!

Yu-Atlanchi! Where death—where death—

The Snake Mother had turned her head; the eyes of the two Lords no longer dwelt on his. They were looking, the three of them, beyond him. The serpent woman was speaking. He heard her voice like faint, far off music. Graydon thought that he glanced behind him.

He saw—Suarra.

So close to him she stood that he could have touched her with his hand. Slender feet bare, her cloudy hair unbound, clothed only in a single scanty robe that hid no curve nor litesome line of her, no ornament but the bracelet of the dinosaurs, she stood. If she saw him, she gave no sign.

And it came to him that she did not see him; did not know that he was there!

On her face the light of a great gladness—as of one who had made a prayer and knows that prayer has been granted.

He reached out a hand to touch her; make her aware of him. He felt nothing, nor did she move—

And suddenly he realized once more that he had no hands!

As he labored to understand this, he saw the Snake Mother's swaying-column grow rigid, her purple eyes fix themselves upon some point, it seemed, far, far beyond the walls of that mysterious temple.

Swift as a blow they returned to him. They smote him; they hurled him away. The hall disintegrated, vanished. He had vertiginous sensation of nightmare speed, as though the earth had spun from under him and let him drop through space. The flight ended; a shock ran through him.

Dazed, he raised his lids. He lay beside the crackling camp fire. And half way between him and the tent was Sterrett charging down on him like a madman and bellowing red rage and vengeance as he came.

Graydon leaped to his feet, but before he could guard himself the giant was upon him. The next moment he was down, overborne by sheer weight. The big adventurer crunched a knee into his arm and gripped his throat. Sterrett's blood-shot eyes blazed into his, his teeth were bared as though to rend him.

"Let her go, did you!" he roared. "Knocked me out and then let her go! Well, damn you, Graydon, here's where you go, too!"

Frantically Graydon tried to break that grip on his throat. His lungs labored; flecks of crimson began to dance across his vision. Sterrett was strangling him. Through fast dimming sight he saw two black shadows leap through the firelight glare and throw themselves on his strangler; clutch the slaying hands.

The fingers relaxed. Graydon, drawing in great sobbing breaths, staggered up. A dozen paces away stood Sterrett, still cursing him, vilely; quivering; straining to leap again upon him. Dancre, arms around his knees, was hanging to him like a little terrier. Beside him was Soames, the barrel of his automatic pressed against the giant's stomach.

"WHY don't you let me kill him?" raved Sterrett. "Didn't I tell you the wench had enough on her to set us

up the rest of our lives? Didn't I tell you she had an emerald that would have made us all rich? And there's more where that one came from. And he let her go! Let her go, the—"

Again his curses flowed.

"Now look here, Sterrett," Soames' voice was deliberate, cold. "You be quiet or I'll do for you. We ain't goin' to let this thing get by us, me and Dancre. We ain't goin' to let this double-crossing whelp do us, and we ain't goin' to let you spill the beans by killing him. We've struck something big. All right, we're goin' to cash in on it. We're goin' to sit down peaceable and Mr. Graydon is goin' to tell us what happened after he put you out, what dicker he made with the girl and all of that. If he won't do it peaceable, then Mr. Graydon is goin' to have things done to him that'll make him give up. That's all. Danc', let go his legs. Sterrett, if you kick up any more trouble until I give the word I'm goin' to shoot you. From now on I boss this crowd—me and Danc'. You understand what I say, Sterrett?"

Graydon, head once more clear, slid a cautious hand down toward his pistol holster. It was empty. Soames grinned, sardonically.

"We got it, Graydon," he said. "Yours, too, Sterrett. Fair enough. Sit down everybody."

He squatted by the fire, still keeping Sterrett covered. And after a moment the latter, grumbling, followed suit. Dancre dropped beside him.

"Come over here, Mr. Graydon," snarled Soames. "Come over and cough up. What're you holdin' out on us? Did you make a date with her to meet you after you got rid of us? If so, where is it—because we'll all go together."

"Where'd you hide those gold spears?" growled Sterrett. "You never let her get away with them, that's sure."

"Shut up, Sterrett," ordered Soames. "I'm holdin' this inquest. Still—there's something in that. Was that it, Graydon? Did she give you the spears and her jewelry to let her go?"

"I've told you," answered Graydon. "I asked for nothing, and I took nothing. Sterrett's drunken folly had put us all in jeopardy. Letting the girl go free was the

first vital step toward our own safety. I thought it was the best thing to do. I still think so."

"Yes?" sneered the lank New Englander, "is that so? Well, I'll tell you, Graydon, if she'd been an Indian maybe I'd agree with you. But not when she was the kind of lady Sterrett says she was. No sir, it ain't natural. You know damned well that if you'd been straight you'd have kept her here till Danc' and I got back. Then we could all have got together and figured what was the best thing to do. Hold her until her folks came along and paid up to get her back undamaged. Or give her the third degree till she gave up where all that gold and stuff she was carrying came from. That's what you would have done, Mr. Graydon, if you weren't a dirty, lyin', double-crossin' hound."

Graydon's temper awakened under the insult, his anger flared up.

"All right, Soames," he said. "I'll tell you. What I've said about freeing her for your own safety is true. But outside of that I would as soon have thought of

trusting a child to a bunch of hyenas as I would of trusting that girl to you three. I let her go a damned sight more for her sake than I did for your own. Does that satisfy you?"

"Aha!" jeered Dancré. "Now I see. Here is this strange lady of so much wealth and beauty. She is too pure and good for us to behold. He tells her so and bids her fly. 'My hero,' she say, 'take all I have and give up this bad company.' 'No, no,' he tells her, 't'inking all the time if he play his cards right he get much more, and us out of the way so he need not dive, 'no, no,' he tells her. 'But long as these bad men stay here you will not be safe.' 'My hero,' say she, 'I will go and bring back my family and they shall dispose of your bad company. But you they shall reward, my hero, oui!' Aha, so that is what it was!"

Graydon flushed; the little Frenchman's malicious travesty shot uncomfortably close. After all, Suarra's unsought promise to save him if she could might be construed as Dancré had suggested. What if he told them that he had warned her that



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whatever the fate in store for them he was determined to share it and that he would stand by them to the last? They would not believe him.

Soames had been watching him closely. "By God, Danc'," he said. "I guess you've hit it. He changed color. He's sold us out!"

For a moment he raised his automatic, held it on Graydon. Sterrett touched his hand.

"Don't shoot him, Soames," he begged. "Give him to me. I want to break his neck."

Soames pushed him away, lowered the gun.

"No," he said, deliberately. "This is too big a thing to let slip by bein' too quick on the trigger. If your dope is right, Danc', and I guess it is, the lady was mighty grateful. All right—we ain't got her, but we have got him. As I figure it, bein' grateful, she won't want him to get killed. Well, we'll trade him for what they got that we want. Tie him up!"

He pointed the pistol at Graydon, Sterrett and Dancre went into the tent, returned with ropes from the pack saddles. Unresisting, Graydon let them bind his wrists. They pushed him over to one of the trees and sat him on the ground with his back against its bole. They passed a rope under his arms and hitched it securely around the trunk. Then they tied his feet.

"Now," said Soames, "if her gang show up in the morning, we'll let 'em see you and find out how much you're worth. They won't rush us; there's bound to be a palaver. And if they don't come to terms, well, Graydon, the first bullet out of this gun goes through your guts. That'll give you time to see what goes on before you die!"

Graydon did not answer him. Nothing that he might say, he knew, would change them from their purpose. He closed his eyes, reviewing that strange dream of his—for dream he now believed it, thrust back among the realities of the camp. A dream borne of Suarra's words and that weird bracelet of the dinosaurs from which gleamed the purple orbs of the serpent woman.

Once or twice he opened his eyes and looked at the others. They sat beside the

fire, heads close together, talking in whispers, their faces tense, and eyes a-glitter with greed, feverish with the gold lust.

And after a while Graydon's head dropped forward. He slept.

CHAPTER 4

The White Llama

IT WAS dawn when Graydon awakened. Some one had thrown a blanket over him during the night, but he was, nevertheless, cold and stiff. He drew his legs up and down painfully, trying to start the sluggish blood. He heard the others stirring in the tent. He wondered which of them had thought of the blanket, and why he had been moved to that kindness.

Sterrett lifted the tent flap, passed by him without a word and went on to the spring. Graydon heard him drinking, thirstily. He returned and busied himself about the fire. There was an oddly furtive air about the big man. Now and then he looked at the prisoner, but with neither anger nor resentment. Rather were his glances apologetic, ingratiating. He slipped at last to the tent, listened, then trod softly over to Graydon.

"Sorry about this," he muttered. "But I can't do anything with Soames or Dancre. Had a hard time persuading 'em even to let you have that blanket. Here, take a drink of this."

He pressed a flask to Graydon's lips. He took a liberal swallow; it warmed him.

"Sh-h," warned Sterrett. "Don't bear any grudge. Drunk last night. I'll help you—" He broke off abruptly; busied himself with the burning logs. Out of the tent came Soames. He scanned Sterrett suspiciously, then strode over to Graydon.

"I'm goin' to give you one last chance, Graydon," he began without preliminary. "Come through clean with us on your dicker with the girl and we'll take you back with us and all work together and all share together. You had the edge on us yesterday and I don't know that I blame you. But it's three to one now and the plain truth is you can't get away with it. So why not be reasonable?"

"What's the use of going over all that again, Soames?" Graydon asked wearily.

"I've told you everything. If you're wise, you'll let me loose, give me my guns and I'll fight for you when the trouble comes. For trouble is coming, man, sure—big trouble."

"Yeh?" snarled the New Englander. "Tryin' to scare us, are you? All right—there's a nice little trick of drivin' a wedge under each of your finger nails and a-keepin' drivin' 'em in. It makes most anybody talk after a while. And if it don't there's the good old fire dodge. Rollin' your feet up to it, closer and closer and closer. Yes, anybody'll talk when their toes begin to crisp up and toast."

Suddenly he bent over and sniffed at Graydon's lips.

"So that's it!" he faced Sterrett, tense, gun leveled from his hip pocket straight at the giant. "Been feedin' him liquor, have you? Been talkin' to him, have you? After we'd settled it last night that I was to do all the talkin'. All right, that settles you, Sterrett. Danc're! Danc'l Come here, quick!" he roared.

The Frenchman came running out of the tent.

"Tie him up," Soames nodded toward Sterrett. "Another damned double-crosser in the camp. Gave him liquor. Got their heads together while we were inside. Tie him."

"But, Soames," the Frenchman was hesitant, "if we have to fight the Indians it is not well to have half of us helpless, no. Perhaps Sterrett, he did nothing—"

"If we have to fight, two men will do as well as three," said Soames. "I ain't goin' to let this thing slip through my fingers, Danc'. I don't think we'll have to do any fightin'. If they come, I think it's goin' to be a tradin' job. Sterrett's turnin' traitor, too. Tie him, I say."

"Well, I don't like it—" began Danc're; Soames made an impatient motion with his automatic; the little Frenchman went to the tent returned with a coil of rope, sidled up to Sterrett.

"Put up your hands," ordered Soames. Sterrett swung them up. But in mid swing they closed on Danc're, lifted him like a doll and held him between himself and the gaunt New Englander.

"Now shoot, damn you," he cried, and bore down on Soames, meeting every move of his pistol arm with Danc're's

wriggling body. Then his own right hand swept down to the Frenchman's belt, drew from the holster his automatic, leveled it over the twisting shoulder at Soames.

"Drop your gun, Yank," grinned Sterrett triumphantly. "Or shoot if you want. But before your bullet's half through Danc're here, by Heaven I'll have you drilled clean!"

There was a momentary, sinister silence. It was broken by a sudden pealing of tiny golden bells. Their chiming cleft through the murk of murder that had fallen on the camp; lightened it; dissolved it as the sunshine does a cloud. Graydon saw Soames' pistol drop from a hand turned nerveless; saw Sterrett's iron grip relax and let Danc're fall to the ground; saw the heads of Danc're and Sterrett and Soames stiffen and point to the source of that aureate music like hounds to a huddling covey.

His own eyes followed—

Through the trees, not a hundred yards away, was Suarra!

And there was no warrior host around her. She had brought with her neither avengers nor executioners. With her were but two followers. Yet even at his first glimpse it came to Graydon that if these were servants, they were two strange, strange servants indeed!

A CLOAK of soft green swathed the girl from neck almost to slender feet. In the misty midnight hair gleamed a coronal of emeralds set in red gold, and bandlets of gold studded with the same virescent gems circled her wrists and ankles. Behind her paced sedately a snow white llama; there was a broad golden collar around its neck from which dropped the strands of golden bells that shook out the tinkling harmonies. Its eyes were blue and between them swayed a pendant of some gem, rosy as the fruit of rubies mated to white pearls. From each of its silvery silken sides a pannier hung, woven, it seemed, from shining yellow rushes.

And at the snow white llama's flanks were two figures, bodies covered by voluminous robes which covered their faces. One was draped in darkest blue; he carried a staff of ebony and strode beside the llama somberly, something disconcertingly mathematical in each step he took.

The other was draped in yellow; he carried a staff of vermillion and he fluttered and danced beside the beast, taking little steps backward and forward; movements that carried the weird suggestion that his robes clothed not a man but some huge bird.

Save for the tinkling bells there was no sound as they came on. Graydon's three jailers stared at the caravan, struck immobile with amazement, incredulous, like dreaming men. Graydon himself strained at his bonds, a sick horror in his heart. Why had Suarra returned deliberately back to this peril? He had warned her; she could not be so innocent as not to know what dangers threatened her at the hands of these men. And why had she come decked out with a queen's ransom in jewels and gold? Almost it seemed that she had done this deliberately; had deliberately arrayed herself to arouse to the full the very passions from which she had most to fear!

"Dieu!" It was Dancré, whispering. "The emeralds!"

"God—what a girl!" it was Sterrett, muttering; his thick nostrils distended, a red flicker in his eyes.

Only Soames said nothing, perplexity, suspicion struggling through the blank astonishment on his bleak and crafty face. Nor did he speak as the girl and her attendants halted close beside him. But the doubt, the suspicion, in his eyes grew as he scanned her and the hooded pair, then sent his gaze along the path up which they had come searching every tree, every bush. There was no sign of movement there, no sound.

"Suarra!" cried Graydon, despairingly, "Suarra, why did you come back?"

Quietly, she stepped over to him, drew a dagger from beneath her cloak, cut the thong that bound him to the tree, slipped the blade under the cords about his wrists and ankles; freed him. He staggered to his feet.

"Was it not well for you that I did come?" she asked sweetly.

Before he could answer, Soames strode forward. And Graydon saw that he had come to some decision, had resolved upon some course of action. He made a low, awkward, half mocking, half respectful bow to the girl; then spoke to Graydon.

"All right," he said, "you can stay loose—as long as you do what I want you to. The girl's back and that's the main thing. She seems to favor you quite a lot, Graydon—an' maybe that's goin' to be damned useful. I reckon that gives us a way to persuade her to talk if it happens she turns quiet like when I get to askin' her certain things—like where those emeralds come from an' how to get there an' the likes of that. Yes, sir, and you favor her. That's useful too. I reckon you don't want to be tied up an' watch certain things happen to her, eh—" he leered at Graydon who curbed with difficulty the impulse to send his fist crashing into the cynical face. "But there's just one thing you've got to do if you want things to go along peaceable," Soames continued. "Don't do any talkin' to her when I ain't close by. Remember, I know the Aymara as well as you do. And I want to be right alongside listenin' in all the time, do you see? That's all."

He turned to Suarra, bowed once more.

"Your visit has brought great happiness, maiden," he spoke in the Aymara. "It will not be a short one, if we have our way—and I think we will have our way—" there was covert, but unmistakable menace in the phrase, yet if she noted it she gave no heed. "You are strange to us, as we must be to you. There is much for us each to learn, one of the other."

"That is true, stranger," she answered, tranquilly. "I think though that your desire to learn of me is much greater than mine to learn of you—since, as you surely know, I have had one not too pleasant lesson." She glanced at Sterrett.

"The lessons, sister," he told her bluntly, indeed brutally, "shall be pleasant or—not pleasant even as you choose to teach us or not to teach us—what we would learn."

This time there was no mistaking the covert menace in the words, nor did Suarra again let it pass. Her eyes blazed suddenly.

"Better not to threaten," she warned, her proud little head thrown haughtily back. "I, Suarra, am not used to threats—and if you will take my counsel you will keep them to yourself hereafter."

"Yes, is that so?" Soames took a step toward her, face grown grim and ugly;

instantly Graydon thrust himself between him and the girl. There came a curious dry chuckling from the hooded figure in yellow. Suarra started; her wrath, her hauteur vanished; she became once more naive, friendly. She pushed Graydon aside.

"I was hasty," she said to Soames. "Nevertheless it is never wise to threaten unless you know the strength of what it is you menace. And remember, of me you know nothing. Yet I know all that you wish to learn. You wish to know how I came by this—and this—and this—" she touched her coronal, her bracelet, her anklets. "You wish to know where they came from, and if there are more of them there, and if so how you may possess yourself of as much as you can carry away. Well, you shall know all that. I have come to tell you."

AT THIS astonishing announcement, apparently so frank and open, all the doubt and suspicion returned to Soames. Again his gaze narrowed and searched the trail up which Suarra and her caravan had come. It returned and rested on the girl; then scrutinized the two servitors who, Graydon now realized, had stood like images ever since that caravan had come to rest within the camp; motionless, and except for that one dry, admonitory chuckling, soundless.

And as he stood thus, considering, Dancré came up and gripped his arm.

"Soames," he said and his voice and his hand were both shaking, "the baskets on the llama! They're not rushes—they're gold, pure gold, pure soft gold, woven like straw! Dieu, Soames, what have we struck!"

Soames' eyes glittered.

"Better go over and watch where they came up, Dancré," he answered. "I don't quite get this. It looks too cursed easy to be right. Take your rifle and squint out from the edge of the trees while I try to get down to what's what."

As though she understood the words, Suarra struck in:

"There is nothing to fear. No harm will come to you from me. If there is any evil in store for you, you yourselves shall summon it—not us. I have come to show you the way to treasure. Only that. Come

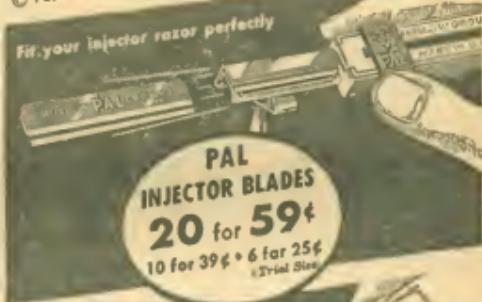
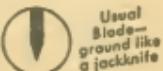


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with me and you shall see where jewels like these"—she touched the gems mashed in her hair—"grow like flowers in a garden. You shall see the gold come streaming forth, living, from—" she hesitated; then went on—"come streaming forth like water. You may bathe in that stream, drink from it if you will, carry away all that you can bear. Or if it causes you too much sorrow to leave it, why—you may stay with it forever; nay, become a part of it, even. Men of gold!"

She laughed; turned from them; walked toward the llama.

The men stared at her and at each other; on the faces of three, greed and suspicion; bewilderment on Graydon's, for beneath the mockery of those last words he had sensed the pulse of the sinister.

"It is a long journey," she faced them, one hand on the llama's head. "You are strangers here; indeed, my guests—in a sense. Therefore I have brought a little something for your entertainment before we start."

She began to unbuckle the panniers. And Graydon was again aware that these two attendants of hers were strange servants—if servants, again, they were. They made no move to help her. Silent they still stood, motionless, faces covered. In their immobility he felt something implacable, ominous, dread. A little shiver shook him.

He stepped forward to help the girl. She smiled up at him, half shyly. In the midnight depths of her eyes was a glow warmer far than friendliness; his hands leaped to touch hers.

Instantly Soames stepped between them.

"Better remember what I told you," he snapped; then ran his hand over the side of the pannier. And Graydon realized that Dancré had spoken truth. The panniers were of gold; soft gold, gold that had been shaped into willow-like withes and plaited.

"Help me," came Suarra's voice. Graydon lifted the basket and set it down beside her. She slipped a hasp; bent back the soft metal withes; drew out a shimmering packet. She shook it and it floated out on the dawn wind, a cloth of silver. She let it float to the ground where it lay like a great web of silver gossamer.

Then from the hamper she brought forth cups of gold and deep, boat shaped golden dishes, two tall ewers whose handles were slender carved dragons, their scales made, it seemed, from molten rubies. After them small golden weaved baskets. She set the silver cloth with the dishes and the cups, she opened the little baskets. In them were unfamiliar, fragrant fruits and loaves and oddly colored cakes. All these Suarra placed upon the plates. She dropped to her knees at the head of the cloth, took up one of the ewers, snapped open its lid and from it poured into the cups clear amber wine.

She raised her eyes to them; waved a white hand, graciously.

"Sit," she said. "Eat and drink."

She beckoned to Graydon; pointed to the place beside her. Silently, gaze fixed on the glittering hoard, Sterrett and Dancré and Soames squatted before the other plates. Soames thrust out a hand, took up one of these and weighed it, scattering what it held upon the ground.

"Gold!" he breathed.

Sterrett laughed crazily; raised his wine filled goblet to his lips.

"Wait!" Dancré caught his wrist. "Eat and drink, she said, eh? Eat, drink and be merry—for tomorrow we die, eh—is that it, Soames?"

The New Englander started, face once more dark with doubt.

"You think the stuff is poisoned?" he snarled.

"Maybe so—maybe no," the little Frenchman shrugged. "But I think it better we say 'After you' to her."

"They are afraid. They think it is—that you have—" Graydon stumbled.

"That I have put sleep—or death in it?" Suarra smiled. "And you?" she asked.

For answer Graydon raised his cup and drank it. For a moment she contemplated him, approval in her gaze.

"Yet it is natural," she turned to Soames. "Yes, it is natural that you three should fear this, since, is it not so—it is what you would do if you were we and we were you? But you are wrong. I tell you again that you have nothing to fear from me—who come only to show you a way. I tell you again that what there is to fear as we go on that way is that which

is in the hearts of you yourselves."

She poured wine into her own cup, drank it; broke off a bit of Sterrett's bread and ate it; took a cake from Dancré's plate and ate that, set white teeth in one of the fragrant fruits.

"Are you satisfied," she asked them. "Oh, be very sure that if it were in my wish to bring death to you it would be in no such form as this."

For a moment Soames glared at her. Then he sprang to his feet, strode over to the hooded, watching figures and snatched aside the cowl of the blue robed one. Graydon with a cry of anger leaped up and after him—then stood, turned to stone.

For the face that Soames had unmasked was like old ivory and it was seamed with a million lines; a face stamped with unbelievable antiquity, but whose eyes were bright and as incredibly youthful as their setting was ancient—

The face of one of those two draped figures that had crouched upon the thrones in that mystic temple of his dream!

The face of one of those mysterious Lords who with that being of coiled beauty Suarra had named the Snake Mother, had listened to, and as he then had thought had granted, Suarra's unknown prayer!

A DOZEN heart beats it may be the gaunt New Englander stared into that inscrutable, ancient face and its unwinking "brilliant eyes. Then he let the hood drop and walked slowly back to the silver cloth. And as he passed him, Graydon saw that his face was white and his gaze was fixed as though he had looked into some unnamable terror. And as he threw himself down at his place and raised his wine cup to his lips, his hand was shaking.

The spell that had held Graydon relaxed. He looked at the black robed figure; it stood as before, motionless and silent. He dropped beside Suarra. Soames, hand still shaking, held out to her his empty goblet. She filled it; he drained it and she filled it again. And Graydon saw now that Sterrett's ruddy color had fled and that Dancré's lips were twitching and had grown gray.

What was it that they had seen in that

seamed, ivory face that had been invisible to him? What warning? What vision of horror?

They drank thirstily of the wine. And soon it had taken effect; had banished their terror—whatever it had been. They ate hungrily of the loaves, the little cakes, the fruit. At last the plates were empty—the tall ewer, too.

"And now," Suarra arose, "it is time for us to go—if you desire still to be led to that treasure house of which I have told you."

"We're going, sister, never fear," Soames grinned half drunkenly, and lurched to his feet. "Danc", stay right here and watch things. Come on, Sterrett," he slapped the giant on the back, all distrust, for the moment at least, vanished. "Come on, Graydon, let by-gones be by-gones."

Sterrett laughed vacantly, scrambled up and linked his arms in the New Englander's. Together they made their way to the tent. Dancré, rifle ready, settled down on a boulder just beyond the fire and began his watch.

Graydon lingered behind. Soames had forgotten him, for a little time at least; Graydon meant to make the best of that time with his strange maid whose beauty and sweetness had netted heart and brain as no other woman ever had. He came close to her, so close that the subtle fragrance of her cloudy hair rocked his heart, so close that her shoulder touching his sent through him little racing, maddening flames.

"Suarra—" he began, hoarsely. Swiftly she turned and silenced him with slender fingers on his lips.

"Not now," she whispered. "You must not tell me what is in your heart—O man to whom my own heart is eager to speak. Not now—nor, it may be, ever—" there was sorrow in her eyes, longing, too; quickly she veiled them—"I promised you that I would save you—if I could. And of that vow was born another promise—" she glanced south toward the two silent, quiet shapes in blue and in yellow, meaningly. "So speak to me not again," she went on hurriedly, "or if you must—let it be of commonplace things, not of that which is in your heart—or mine!"

Stupidly he looked at her. What did she mean by a promise born of that she had

made to him? A vow to these—Lords; to the mystery of the serpent's coils and woman's face and breasts—the Snake Mother? A vow in exchange for his life? Had they seen deeper into her heart than he had found there in every truth what he had half dreamed might be? Had she vowed to them to hold him apart from her if they would grant him protection, his comrades too—if they would have it?

Suddenly it came to him that for him, at least, the life she would save by such a barter would not be worth living.

She was packing away the golden cups and dishes. Mechanically he set about helping her. And, save for what he handled, he thought with grim humor, this was a commonplace thing enough surely to satisfy her. She accepted his aid without comment, looked at him no more. And after a while the fever in his blood cooled, his hot revolt crystallized into cold determination. For the moment he would accept the situation. He would let matters develop. His time would come. He could afford to wait.

Without a word when the last shining cup was in the pannier and the mouth of the latter closed he turned and strode to the tent to get together his duffle, pack his burro. The voices of Sterrett and Soames came to him; he hesitated; listened.

"What it was when I looked into his damned wrinkled old face I don't know," he heard Soames say. "But something came over me, Sterrett. I can't remember—only that it was like looking over the edge of the world into hell!"

"I know," Sterrett's voice was hoarse, "I felt the same way."

"Hypnotism," said Soames, "That's what it was. The Indian priests down here know how to work it. But he won't catch me again with that trick. I'll shoot. You can't hypnotize a gun, Sterrett."

"But they're not Indians, Soames," came Sterrett's voice. "They're whiter than you and me. What are they? And the girl—God—"

"What they are we'll find out, never fear," grunted the New Englander. "To hell with the girl—take her if you can get her. But I'd go through a dozen hells to get to the place where that stuff they're carryin' samples of comes from. Man—

with what we could carry out on the burros and the llama and come back for—man, we could buy the world!"

"Yes—unless there's a trap somewhere," said Sterrett, dubiously.

"We've got the cards in our hands," plainly the drink was wearing off Soames, all his old confidence and cunning were returning. "Hell—what's against us? Two old men and a girl. Now I'll tell you what I think. I don't know who and what they are, but whoever or whatever, you can bet there ain't many of 'em. If there was, they'd be landin' on us hard. No—they're damned anxious to get us away and they're willin' to let us get out with what we can to get us away. Poor boobs—they think if they give us what we want now we'll slip right off and never come back. And as for what they are, well, I'll tell you what I think—half-breeds. The Spanish were down here, maybe they bred in with the Incas. There's probably about a handful left. They know we could wipe 'em out in no time. They want to get rid of us, quick and cheap as possible. And the three of us could wipe 'em out."

"Three of us?" asked Sterrett. "Four you mean. There's Graydon."

"Graydon don't count—the damned crook. Thought he'd sold us out, didn't he? All right—we'll fix Mr. Graydon when the time comes. Just now he's useful to us on account of the girl. She's stuck on him. But when the time comes to divide—there'll only be three of us. And there'll only be two of us—if you do anything like you did this morning."

"Cut that out, Soames," growled the giant. "I told you it was the drink. I'm through with that now that we've seen this stuff. I'm with you to the limit. Do what you want with Graydon. But save the girl for me. I'd be willing to make a bargain with you on that—give up a part of my share."

"Oh, hell," drawled Soames. "We've been together a good many years, Bill. There's enough and plenty for the three of us. You can have the girl for nothing."

LITTLE flecks of red danced before Graydon's eyes. With his hand stretched to tear open the tent flap and grapple with these two who could talk so callously and evilly of Suarra's dis-

posal, he checked himself. That was no way to help her. Unarmed, what could he do against these armed adventurers? Nothing. Some way he must get back to his own weapons. And the danger was not imminent—they would do nothing before they reached that place of treasure to which Suarra had promised to lead them.

There had been much of reason in Soames' explanation of the mystery.

That vision of his—what was it after all but an illusion? He remembered the sensation that had caught him when he had first seen those brilliant purple jewels in Suarra's bracelet; the feeling that he looked along them for great distances back to actual eyes of which the purple jewels were but prolongations. That vision of his—was it not but a dream induced by those jewels? A fantasy of the subconsciousness whipped out of it by some hypnotic quality they possessed? Science, he knew, admits that some gems hold this quality—though why they do science cannot tell. Dimly he remembered that he had once read a learned article that had tried to explain the power—something about the magnetic force in light, a force within those vibrations we call color; something about this force being taken up by the curious mechanism of rods and cones in the retina which flashes the sensations we call color along the optic nerves to the brain.

These flashes, he recalled the article had said, were actual though minute discharges of electricity. And since the optic nerves are not in reality nerves at all, but prolongations of the brain, this unknown force within the gems impinged directly upon the brain, stimulating some cells, depressing others, affecting memory and judgment, creating visions, disturbing all that secret world until the consciousness became dazzled, bewildered, unable to distinguish between reality and illusion.

So much for his vision. That the face of the figure in blue seemed to be one of those Lords he had seen in that vision—well, was not that but another illusion?

Soames might well be right, too, he thought, in his interpretation of Suarra's visit to the camp. If she had power behind her would she not have brought it? Was it not more reasonable to accept the New Englander's version of the thing?

And if that were so, then Suarra was but a girl with only two old men to help her—for he had no doubt that the figure in yellow like that in blue was an old man too.

And all that meant that he, Graydon, was all of strength that Suarra could really count on to protect her.

He had spun his web of reasoning with the swiftness of a dream. When he had arrived at its last strand he stole silently back a score of paces, waited for a moment or two; then went noisily to the tent. For the first time in many hours he felt in full command of himself; thought he saw his way clear before him. Faintly he recognized that he had glossed over, set aside arbitrarily, many things. No matter—it was good to get his feet on earth again, to brush aside all these cobwebs of mystery, to take the common sense view. It was good and it was—safer.

He thrust aside the tent flap and entered.

"Been a long while comin'," snarled Soames, again his old, suspicious self. "Been talkin'—after what I told you?"

"Not a word," answered Graydon cheerfully. He busied himself with his belongings. "By the way, Soames," he said casually, "don't you think it's time to stop this nonsense and give me back my guns?"

Soames made no answer; went on with his hasty packing.

"Oh, all right then," Graydon went on. "I only thought that they would come in handy when the pinch comes. But if you want me to look on while you do the scrapping—well, I don't mind."

"You'd better mind." Soames did not turn around, but his voice was deadly. "You'd better mind, Graydon. If a pinch comes, we're takin' no chances of a bullet in our backs. That's why you got no guns. And if the pinch does come—well, we'll take no chances on you anyway. Do you get me?"

Graydon shrugged his shoulders. In silence the packing was completed; the tent struck; the burros loaded.

Suarra stood awaiting them at the side of the white llama. Soames walked up to her, drew from its holster his automatic, balanced it in outstretched hand.

"You know what this is?" he asked.

"Why, yes," she answered. "It is the death weapon of your kind."

"Right," said Soames. "And it deals death quickly, quicker than spears or arrows."

He raised his voice so there could be no doubt that blue cowl and yellow cowl must also hear. "No, sister, I and these two men here," he indicated Sterrett and Dancré, "carry these and others still more deadly. This man's weapons we have taken from him," he pointed to Graydon. "Your words may be clearest truth. I hope they are—for your sake and this man's and the two who came with you—him and him—" he wagged a long finger at Graydon, at blue cowl, at yellow cowl. "Quick death! We'll get them out of the way first. And we'll attend to you later—as it seems best to me."

He scanned her through slitted eyes that gleamed coldly.

"You understand me?" he asked, and grinned like a hungry wolf.

"I understand," Suarra's eyes and face were calm, but there was more than a touch of scorn in her golden voice. "You need fear nothing from us."

"We don't," said Soames. "But you have much to fear—from us."

Another moment he regarded her, menacingly; then shoved his pistol back into its holster.

"Go first," he ordered. "Your two attendants behind you. And then you," he pointed to Graydon. "We three march in the rear—with guns ready."

Without a word Suarra swung away at the white llama's head; behind her paced blue cowl and yellow. And a dozen paces behind them walked Graydon. Behind the file of burros strode giant Sterrett, lank Soames, little Dancré—rifles ready, eyes watchful.

And so they passed through the giant algarrobas; out into the oddly parklike spaces beyond.

CHAPTER 5

The Thing That Fled

THEY had traveled over the savanna for perhaps an hour when Suarra abruptly turned to the left, entering the forest that covered the flanks of

a great mountain. Soon the trees closed in on them. Graydon could see no trail, yet the girl went on surely, without pause. He knew there must be signs to guide her since her course took them now to one side, now to another; once he was certain that they had almost circled. Yes, trail there must be—unless Suarra was purposely trying to confuse them to prevent them from return. He could see nothing around him but the immense tree trunks, while the thick roof of leaves shut out all sight of the sun and so hid this means of discovering direction.

Another hour went by and the way began to climb, the shade to grow denser. Deeper it became and deeper until the girl was but a flitting shadow. Blue robe he could hardly see at all, but yellow robe stood out sharply, his bird suggestion suddenly accentuated—as though he had been a monstrous yellow parrot.

Once or twice Graydon had glanced at the three men behind him. The darkness was making them more and more uneasy. They walked close together, eyes and ears obviously strained to catch first faint stirrings of ambush. And now, as the green gloom grew denser still, Soames strode forward and curtly ordered him to join Dancré and Sterrett. For an instant he hesitated; read murder in the New Englander's eyes; realized the futility of resistance and dropped back. Soames pressed forward until he was close behind blue cowl and yellow. They did not turn their heads nor did the girl.

Dancré motioned him in between himself and Sterrett, grinning wickedly.

"Soames has changed his plan," he whispered. "If there is trouble he shoot the old devils—quick. He keep the girl to make trade wit' her people. He keep you to make trade wit' the girl. Eh?"

Graydon did not answer. He had already realized what the maneuver meant. But a wave of jubilation swept over him. When the Frenchman had pressed close to him he had felt an automatic in his side pocket. If an attack did come, he thought, he would leap upon Dancré, snatch the pistol and gain for himself at least a fighting chance. He kept as close to him as he dared without arousing suspicion.

Darker grew the woods until the figures in front of him were only a moving blur.

Then swiftly the gloom began to lighten. It came to him that they had been passing through some ravine, some gorge whose unseen walls had been pressing in upon them and that had now begun to retreat.

A few minutes longer and he knew he was right. Ahead of them loomed a prodigious doorway, a cleft whose sides reached up for thousands of feet. Beyond was a flood of dazzling sunshine. Suarra stopped at the rocky threshold with a gesture of warning; peered through; beckoned them on.

Blinking, Graydon walked through the portal. Behind and on each side towered the mountain. He looked out over a broad grass covered plain strewn with huge, isolated rocks rising from the green like menhirs of the Druids. There were no trees. The plain was dish shaped; an enormous oval as symmetrical as though it had been molded by the thumb of Cyclopean potter. Straight across it, five miles or more away, the forests began again. They clothed the base of another gigantic mountain whose walls rose perpendicularly a mile at least in air. The smooth scarps described, he saw, an arc of a tremendous circle—as round as Fujiyama's sacred cone, but hundreds of times its girth.

Rushed back on Graydon the picture of the hidden circular valley with its wheeling, moon bathed colossi and up-rushing city of djinns into which last night he had dreamed the purple eyes of the Snake Mother had drawn him! Had it after all been no dream, but true vision? Were these rounded precipices the outer shell of that incredible place?

Suarra's story—true?

Shaken, he glanced toward her. She stood a dozen paces away, hand on the white llama's neck and gazing intently over the plain. There was anxiety in her gaze—but there was none in the attitude of those two strange servitors of hers. As silent, as unconcerned, as detached as ever, they seemed to await the girl's next move.

And now Graydon noted that they were on a wide ledge that bordered this vast oval bowl. This shelf was a full hundred feet higher than the bottom of the valley whose sides sloped to it like the sides of a saucer. And, again carrying out that suggestion of a huge dish, the ledge jutted out like a rim. He guessed that there was a concavity under his feet, and that if one should fall over the side it would be well nigh impossible to climb back because of that overhang. The surface was about twelve feet wide, and more like road carefully leveled by human hands than work of nature. Its nearer boundary was a tree covered wall of rock; unscalable. On one side the curving bowl of the valley with its weird monoliths and the circular scarp of the mysterious mountain; on the other the wooded cliffs.

There was a stirring in the undergrowth where the trees ended their abrupt descent. A goat like animal slipped out of the covert and paused, head high, nostrils testing the air.

"Meat!" exclaimed Sterrett. His rifle cracked. The beast sank to the path, twitched and lay still. Suarra leaped from the llama's side and faced the giant, eyes blazing wrath and behind that anger, or so it seemed to Graydon, fear.

"Fool!" she cried, and stamped her foot. "You fool! Get back to the cleft."

BAND LEADER SWITCHES TO BLEND LEADER

AMARILLO, Texas—Billy F. Briggs, Amarillo band leader, has switched to Calvert Reserve. "Lighter, smoother, milder," he says. "Calvert is tops for moderate drinking."



She ran to the llama; caught it by the bridle; drove it, the burros and the four men back to the shelter of the ravine mouth.

"You—" she spoke to Soames. "If you desire to reach that gold for which you thirst, see that this man uses no more than death weapon of his while we are on this path. Nor any of you. Now stay here—and be quiet until I bid you come forth."

She did not wait for a reply. She ran to the cleft's opening and Graydon followed. She paused there, scanning the distant forest edge. And once more—and with greater force than ever before—the tranquility, the inhuman immobility, the indifference of those two enigmatic servitors assailed him.

THEY had not moved from the path. Suarra took a step toward them, and half held out helpless, beseeching hands. They made no movement—and with a little helpless sigh she dropped her hands and resumed her worried scrutiny of the plain.

There flickered through Graydon a thought, a vague realization. In these two cloaked and hooded figures dwelt—power. He had not been wrong in recognizing them as the Two Lords of the luminous temple. But the power they owned would not be spent to save him or the three from any consequences of their own acts, would not be interposed between any peril that they themselves should invite.

Yes, that was it! There had been some vow—some bargain—even as Suarra had said. She had promised to save him, Graydon—if she could. She had promised the others treasure and freedom—if they could win them. Very well—the hooded pair would not interfere. But neither would they help. They were judges, watching a game. They had given Suarra permission to play that game—but left the playing of it rigidly up to her.

That nevertheless they would protect her he also believed. And with that conviction a great burden lifted from his mind. Her anxiety now he understood. It was not for herself, but for—him!

"Suarra," he whispered. She did not turn her head, but she quivered at his voice.

"Go back," she said. "Those from whom I watch have sharp eyes. Stay with the others—"

Suddenly he could have sworn that he heard the whirling beat of great wings over her head. He saw—nothing. Yet she lifted her arms in an oddly summoning gesture, spoke in words whose sounds were strange to him, all alien liquid labials and soft sibilants. Once more he heard the wing beats and then not far away but faint, so faint, a note of the elfin horn!

She dropped her arms, motioned him back to the others. From the dimness of the cleft he watched her. Slow minutes passed. Again he heard the horn note, the faint whirring as of swiftly beating wings above her. And again could see nothing!

But as though she had received some message Suarra turned, the anxiety, the trouble gone from her face. She beckoned.

"Come out," she said. "None has heard. We can be on our way. But remember what I have said. Not a second time may you escape."

She marched on with the llama. When she reached the animal that had fallen to Sterrett's aim she paused.

"Take that," she ordered. "Throw it back among the trees as far as you can from this path."

"Hell, Soames," cried Sterrett. "Don't fall for that. It's good meat. I'll slip it in on one of the burros."

But Soames was staring at the girl.

"Afraid something'll track us by it?" he asked. She nodded. Some of the cynic evil fled from the New Englander's face.

"She's right," he spoke curtly to Sterrett. "Pick it up and throw it away. And do as she says. I think she's goin' to play square with us. No more shootin', d'you hear?"

Sterrett picked up the little animal and hurled it viciously among the trees.

The caravan set forth along the rim-like way. Noon came and in another ravine that opened upon the strange road they snatched from the saddle bags a hasty lunch. They did not waste time in unpacking the burros. There was a little brook singing in the pass and from it they refilled their canteens, then watered the animals. This time Suarra did not join them, sitting aloof with blue cowl and yellow.

By mid-afternoon they were nearing the northern end of the bowl. All through the day the circular mountain across the plain had unrolled its vast arc of cliff. And through the day Suarra's watch for its forest clothed base had never slackened. A wind had arisen, sweeping toward them from those wooded slopes, bending the tall heads of the grass so far below them.

Suddenly, deep within that wind, Graydon heard a faint, far off clamor, an eerie hissing, shrill and avid, as of some on-rushing army of snakes. The girl heard it too, for she halted and stood tense, face turned toward the sounds. They came again—and louder. And now her face whitened, but her voice when she spoke was steady.

"Danger is abroad," she said, "Deadly danger for you. It may pass and—it may not. Until we know what to expect you must hide. Take your animals and tether them in the underbrush there." She pointed to the mountain-side which here was broken enough for cover. "The four of you take trees and hide behind them. Tie the mouths of your animals that they make no noise."

"So?" snarled Soames. "So here's the trap, is it? All right, sister, you know what I told you. We'll go into the trees, but—you go with us where we can keep our hands on you."

"I will go with you," she answered indifferently. "If those who come have not been summoned by the noise of that fool's death weapon"—she pointed to Sterrett—"you can be saved. If they have been summoned by it—none can save you."

Soames glared at her, then turned abruptly.

"Danc'," he ordered, "Sterrett—get the burros in. And Graydon—you'll stay with the burros and see they make no noise. We'll be right close—with the guns—and we'll have the girl—don't forget that."

Again the wind shrilled with the hissing.

"Be quick," cried Suarra.

SWIFTLY they hid themselves. When trees and underbrush had closed in upon them it flashed on Graydon, crouching behind the burros, that he had not seen the two cloaked familiars of Suarra join the hurried retreat and seek the shelter of the woods. He was at the edge of the

path and cautiously he parted the bushes; peered through.

The two were not upon the rim!

Simultaneously, the same thought had come to Dancré. His voice came from a near-by hole.

"Soames—where those two old devils wit' the girl go?"

"Where'd they go?" Soames repeated blankly. "Why, they came in with us, of course."

"I did not see them," persisted Dancré. "I t'ink not, Soames. If they did—then where are they?"

"You see those two fellows out on the path, Graydon?" called Soames, anxiety in his tones.

"No," answered Graydon curtly.

Soames cursed wickedly.

"So that's the game, eh?" he grunted. "It's a trap! And they've cut out and run to bring 'em here!"

He dropped into the Aymara and spoke to Suarra.

"You know where those men of yours are?" he asked menacingly.

Graydon heard her laugh and knew that she was close beside the New Englander with Dancré and Sterrett flanking her.

"They come and go as they will," she answered serenely.

"They'll come and go as I will," he snarled. "Call them."

"I call them," again Suarra laughed. "Why, they do not my bidding. Nay—I must do theirs—"

"Don't do that, Soames!" Dancré's cry was sharp, and Graydon knew that Soames must have made some threatening movement. "If they're gone, you cannot bring them back. We have the girl. Stop, I say!"

Graydon jumped to his feet. Bullets or no bullets, he would fight for her. As he poised to leap a sudden gust of wind tore at the trees. It brought with it a burst of the weird hissing, closer, strident, in it a devilish undertone that filled him with unfamiliar nightmarish terror.

Instantly came Suarra's voice

"Down! Down—Graydon!"

Then Dancré's quivering voice called with the same fear that had gripped him:

"Down! Soames won't hurt her. For God's sake, hide yourself, Graydon, till we know what's coming!"

Graydon turned; looked out over the plain before he sank again behind the burros. And at that moment, from the forests which at this point of the narrowing bowl were not more than half a mile away, he saw dart out a streak of vivid scarlet. It hurled itself into the grass and scuttled with incredible speed straight toward one of the monoliths that stood, black and sheer a good three quarters of the distance across the dish shaped valley and its top fifty feet or more above the green. From Graydon's own height he could see the scarlet thing's swift rush through the grasses. As he sank down it came to him that whatever it was, it must be of amazing length to be visible so plainly at that distance. And what was it? It ran like some gigantic insect!

He parted the bushes, peered out again. The scarlet thing had reached the monolith's base. And as he watched it raised itself against the rock and swarmed up its side to the top. At the edge it paused, seemed to raise its head cautiously and scan the forest from which it had come.

The air was clear, and against the black background of stone, the vividly colored body stood out. Graydon traced six long, slender legs by which it clung to the rocky surface. There was something about the body that was monstrous, strangely revolting. In its listening, reconnoitering attitude and the shape of its head was something more monstrous still, since it carried with it a vague, incredible suggestion of humanness.

Suddenly the scarlet shape slipped down the rock and raced with that same amazing speed through the grasses toward where Graydon watched. An instant later there burst out of the forest what at first glance he took for a pack of immense hunting dogs—then realized that whatever they might be dogs they certainly were not. They came forward in great leaps that reminded him of the motion of kangaroos. And as they leaped they glittered in the sun with flashes of green and blue as though armored in mail made of emeralds and sapphires.

Nor did ever dogs give tongue as they did. They hissed as they ran, shrilly, stridently, the devilish undertones accentuated—a monstrous, ear piercing sibilant that drowned all other sounds and

struck across the nerves with fingers of unfamiliar primeval terror.

The scarlet thing darted to right, to left, frantically; then crouched at the base of another monolith, motionless.

And now, out of the forest, burst another shape. Like the questing creatures, this glittered too but with sparks of black as though its body was cased in polished jet. Its bulk was that of a giant draft horse, but its neck was long and reptilian. At the base of that neck, astride it, he saw plainly the figure of—a man!

A dozen leaps and it was close behind the glittering pack, now nosing and circling between the first monolith and the woods.

The Xinli? It was the name she had given the beasts of the bracelet that held in their paws the disk of the Snake Mother!

The dinosaurs!

His own burro lay close beside him. With trembling hand he reached into a saddlebag and drew out his field glasses. He focused them upon the pack. They swam mistily in the lenses, then sharpened into clear outline. Directly in his line of vision, in the center of the lens, was one of the creatures that had come to gaze, that stood rigidly, its side toward him, pointing like a hunting dog. The excellent glasses brought it so closely to him that he could stretch out a hand it seemed, and touch it.

And it was—a dinosaur!

Dwarfed to the size of a Great Dane dog, still there was no mistaking its breed—one of those leaping, upright-walking monstrous lizards that millions of years ago had ruled the earth and without whose extinction, so science taught, man could never have arisen ages later to take possession of this planet. Graydon could see its blunt and spade shaped tail, which, with its powerful, pillar-like hind legs, made the tripod upon which it squatted. Its body was nearly erect. It had two forelegs or arms, absurdly short, but muscled as powerfully as those upon which it sat. It held these half curved as though about to clutch. And at their ends were—no paws; no—but broad hands, each ending in four merciless talons, of which one thrust outward like a huge thumb and each of them armed with chisel-like claws, whose edges, he knew, were as keenly sharp as scimitars.

WHAT he had taken for mail of sapphire and emerald were the scales of this dwarfed dinosaur. They overlapped one another like the scales upon an armadillo and it was from their burnished blue and green surfaces and edges that the sun rays struck out the jewel glints.

The creature turned its head upon its short, bull-like neck; it seemed to stare straight at Graydon. He glimpsed little fiery red eyes set in a sloping, bony arch of narrow forehead. Its muzzle was shaped like that of a crocodile, but smaller; truncated. Its jaws were closely studded with long, white and pointed fangs. The jaws slavered.

In a split second of time the mind of Graydon took in these details. Then beside the pointing dinosaur leaped the beast of the rider. Swiftly his eyes took it in—true dinosaur this one, too, but ebon scaled, longer tailed, the hind legs more slender and its neck a cylindrical rod five times thicker than the central coil of the giant boa. His eyes flashed from it to the rider.

Instantly Graydon knew him for a man of Suarra's own race—whatever that might be. There was the same ivory whiteness of skin, the same more than classic regularity of feature. The face, like hers, was beautiful, but on it was stamped an inhuman pride and a relentless, indifferent cruelty—equally as inhuman. He wore a close fitting suit of green that clung to him like a glove. His hair was a shining golden that gleamed in the sun with almost the brilliancy of the hunting dinosaurs' scales. He sat upon a light saddle fastened to the neck of his incredible steed just where the shoulders met it.

There were heavy reins that ran to the mouth of the snake-slender, snake-long head of the jetty dinosaur.

Graydon's glasses dropped from a nerveless hand. What manner of people were these who hunted with dinosaurs for dogs and a dinosaur for a steed!

His eyes fell to the base of the monolith where had crouched the scarlet thing. It was no longer there. He caught a gleam of crimson in the high grass not a thousand feet from him where he watched. Cautiously the thing was creeping on and on toward the rim. He wondered whether those spider legs could climb it, carry it over the outjutting of the ledge? He shuddered. A deeper dread grew. Could the dinosaur pack scramble or leap over that edge in pursuit? If so—

There came a shrieking clamor like a thousand fumaroles out of which hissed the hate of hell. The pack had found the scent and were leaping down in a glittering green and blue wave.

As they raced the scarlet thing itself leaped out of the grasses not a hundred yards away.

And Graydon glared at it with a numbing, sick horror at his heart. He heard behind him an incredulous oath from Soames; heard Dancré groan with, he knew, the same horror that held him.

The scarlet thing swayed upon two long and slender legs, its head a full fifteen feet above the ground. High on these stilts of legs was its body, almost round and no larger than a child's. From its shoulders waved four arms, as long and as slender as the legs, eight feet or more in length. They were human arms—but human arms that had been stretched



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like rubber to thrice their normal length. The hands—or "claws"—were gleaming white. Body, arms, and legs were covered with a glistening, scarlet silken down.

The head was a human head.

The man's head had a man's face, brown skinned, hawk nosed, the forehead broad and intelligent, the eyes inordinately large, unwinking and filled with soul destroying terror.

A man spider!

A man who by some infernal art had been remodeled into the mechanical semblance of the spinning Arachnidae, without the stamp of his essential human origin having been wiped away in the process!

Only for a moment the man-spider stood thus revealed. The pack was rushing down upon it like a cloud of dragons. It screamed, one shrill, high pitched note that wailed like the voice of ultimate agony above the hissing clamor of the pack. It hurled itself, a thunderbolt of scarlet fear, straight toward the rim.

Beneath him, Graydon heard the sounds of frantic scrambling and a scratching. Two hands a full foot long, pallidly shining, shot over the rim of the ledge, gripping it with long fingers that were like blunt needles of bone, horn covered. They clutched and shot forward, behind them a length of spindling scarlet-downed arm.

It was the man-spider, drawing himself over—and the wave of dinosaurs was now almost at the spot from which it had hurled itself at the ledge!

The spell of terror upon Graydon broke.

"A gun," he gasped. "For God's sake, Soames, throw me a gun!"

Against his will, his gaze swept back to those weird, clutching hands. He thought he saw a rod dart out of the air and touch them, the long blue rod he had seen carried by Suarra's hooded attendant in blue.

Whether he saw it, whether he did not, the needle-fingered claws opened convulsively; released their hold; slid off.

Glittering pack and ebon dinosaur steed alike were hidden from him by the overhang of the shelf-like road. But up from that hidden slope came a fiendish, triumphant screaming. An instant later and out into the range of his sight bounded the great black dinosaur, its golden haired

rider shouting; behind it leaped the jewel scaled horde. They crossed the plain like a thunder cloud pursued by emerald and sapphire lightnings. They passed into the forest and were gone.

"That danger is over," he heard Suarra say coolly. "Come. We must go on more quickly now."

She stepped out of the tree shadows and came tranquilly to him. Soames and Dancré and Sterrett, white faced and shaking, huddled close behind her. Graydon arose; managed to muster something of his old reckless air. She smiled at him, that half shy approval of him again in her eyes.

"It was just a weaver," she said gently. "We have many such. He tried to escape—or maybe Lantlu opened the door that he might try to escape, so he could hunt him. Lantlu loves to hunt with the Xinli. Or it may be that his weaving went wrong and this was his punishment. At any rate, it is fortunate that he did not gain this road, since if he had, the Xinli and Lantlu would surely have followed. And then—"

She did not end the sentence, but the shrug of her shoulders was eloquent.

"Just a weaver!" Soames broke in, hoarsely. "What do you mean? God in heaven, it had a man's head!"

"It was a man!" gasped Dancré.

"No," she paid no heed to him, speaking still to Graydon. "No—it was no man. At least no man as you are. Long, long ago, it is true, his ancestors were men like you. But not he. He was just—a weaver."

She stepped out upon the path. And Graydon, following, saw waiting there, as quietly, as silently, as tranquilly as though they had not stirred since first he and his companions had fled—the blue cowled and yellow cowled familiars of Suarra. Immobile, they waited while she led forth the white llama. And as she passed Graydon she whispered to him.

"The weaver had no soul. Yu-Atlanchi fashioned him as he was. Remember him—Graydon—when you come to our journey's end!"

She took her place at the head of the little caravan. Blue cowl and yellow paced behind her. Soames touched Graydon, woke him from the stark amaze into which

those last words of hers had thrown him.

"Take your old place," said Soames. "We'll follow. Later—we want to talk to you, Graydon. Maybe you can get your guns back—if you're reasonable."

Suarra turned.

"Hurry," she urged; "the sun sinks and we must go quickly. Before tomorrow's noon you shall see your garden of jewels and the living gold streaming for you to do with it—or the gold to do with you—as you yourselves shall will it."

They set forth along the rimmed trail.

THE plain was silent, deserted. From the far forests came no sound. Graydon, as he walked, strove to fit together in his mind all that swift tragedy he had just beheld and what the girl had told him. A weaver she had called the scarlet thing—and soulless and no man. Once more she had warned him of the power of that hidden, mysterious Yu-Atlanchi. What was it she had told him once before of that power? That it slew souls or changed them!

A weaver? A man-spider who was soulless but whose ancestors ages ago had been men like himself—so she had said. Did he mean that in that place she called Yu-Atlanchi dwelt those who could reshape not only that unseen dweller in our bodies that we name the soul, but change at will the house of the soul?

A weaver? A spider-man whose arms and legs were slender and long and spider-like—whose hands were like horn-covered needles of the bond—whose body was like the round ball of a spider!

And she said that the scarlet thing might have offended Lantlu by its weaving. Lantlu? The rider of the jetty dinosaur, of course.

A weaver! A picture flashed in his brain, clean cut though his eyes beheld it. A picture of the scarlet thing in a great web, moving over it with his long and slender legs, clicking his needled hands, a human brain in a superspider's body, weaving, weaving—the very clothing that Suarra herself wore.

A vast hall of giant webs, each with its weaver—man headed, man faced, spider bodied!

Was that true picturing? Suddenly he

was sure of it. Nor was it impossible. He knew that Roux, that great French scientist, had taken the eggs of frogs and by manipulating them had produced giant frogs and dwarfs, frogs with two heads and one body, frogs with one head and eight legs, three headed frogs with legs like centipedes.

And other monsters still he had molded from the very stuff of life—monstrous things that were like nothing this earth had ever seen, nightmare things that he had been forced to slay—and quickly.

If Roux had done all this—and he had done it, Graydon knew—then was it not possible for greater scientist to take men and women and by similar means breed—such creatures as the scarlet thing? A man-spider?

Nature herself had given the French scientist the hint upon which the experiments had been based. Nature herself produced from the time to time such abnormalities—human monsters marked outwardly and inwardly with the stigmata of the beast, the fish—even of the insect.

In man's long ascent from the speck of the primeval jelly on the shallow shores of the first seas, he had worn myriad shapes. And as he moved higher from one shape to another his cousins kept them, becoming during the ages the fish he caught today, the horses he rode, the apes he brought from the jungles to amuse him in his cages. Even the spiders that spun in his gardens, the scorpion that scuttled from the tread of his feet, were abysmally distant blood brothers of his, sprung from the ancient Tribolite that in its turn had sprung from forms through which was to be at last man himself had come.

Yes, had not all life on earth a common origin? Divergent now and myriad formed—man and beast, fish and serpent, lizard and bird, ant and bee and spider—all had once been in those little specks of jelly adrift in the shallow littorals of seas of an earth still warm and pulsating with the first throbs of life. Protalbion, he remembered Gregory of Edinburgh had named it—the first stuff of life from which all life was to emerge.

Could the germs of those shapes that he had worn in his progress to humanity be dormant in man? Waiting for some



A whole new world of appalling grotesquerie—soulless spider men and spider women. . . .

master hand of science to awaken them, and having awakened, blend them with the shape of man?

Yes! Nature had produced such monstrosities, and unless the shapes had lain dormant and been capable of awakening, even Nature could not have accomplished it. For even Nature cannot build something out of nothing. Roux had studied that work of hers, dipped down into the crucible of birth and molded there his monsters from these dormant forms, even as had Nature.

Might it not be then that in Yu-Atlanchi dwelt those who knew so well the secrets of evolution that in the laboratories of birth they could create men and women things of any shape desired?

A loom is but a dead machine on which fingers work more or less clumsily. The spider is both machine and living artisan,

spinning, weaving, more surely, more exquisitely than could any dead machines worked by man. Who had approached the delicacy, the beauty, of the spider's web?

Suddenly Graydon seemed to look into a whole new world of appalling grotesquerie—soulless spider men and spider women spread out over great webs and weaving with needled fingers wondrous fabrics; gigantic soulless ant men and ant women digging, burrowing, mazes of subterranean passages, conduits, cloaca for those who had wrought them into being; strange soulless amphibian folk busy about that lake that in his vision had circled up to him before he glimpsed the djinn city.

Phantasmagoria of humanity twinned with Nature's perfect machines while still plastic in the egg!

Came to him remembrance of Suarra's



warning of what might await him at journey's end. Had she meant to prepare him for change like this?

Shuddering, he thrust away that nightmare vision!

CHAPTER 6

The Elfin Horns

THE sun was halfway down the west when they reached the far end of the plain. Here another ravine cut through the rocky wall, and into it they filed. The trees closed in behind them, shutting out all sight of the bowl and the great circular mountain.

The new trail ran always upward, although at an almost imperceptible grade. Once, looking backward through a rift in the trees, Graydon caught a glimpse of the grassy slopes far beneath. For the

rest the tree screened, tree bordered way gave no hint of what lay ahead.

It was close to dusk when they passed out of the trees once more and stood at the edge of a little moor. A barren it was indeed, more than a moor. Its floor was clean white sand and dotted with hillocks, mounds flat topped as though swept by constant brooms of wind. Upon the rounded slopes of these mounds a tall grass grew sparsely. The mounds arose about a hundred feet apart with curious regularity; almost, the fancy came to him, as though they were graves in a cemetery of giants. The little barren covered, he estimated roughly, about five acres. Around its sides the forest clustered. Near by he heard the gurgling of a brook.

Straight across the sands Suarra led them until she had reached a mound close to the center of the barren. Here she halted.

"You will camp here," she said. "Water is close by for you and your animals. You may light a fire. And sleep without fear. By dawn we must be away."

She turned and walked toward another knoll a hundred feet or more away. The white llama followed her. Behind it stalked the silent pair. Graydon had expected Soames to halt her, but he did not. Instead his eyes flashed some crafty message to Dancré and Sterrett. It seemed to Graydon that they were pleased that the girl was not to share their camp; that they welcomed the distance she had put between them.

And their manner to him had changed. They were comradely once more.

"Mind taking the burros over to water?" asked Soames. "We'll get the fire going and chow ready."

He nodded and led the little beasts over to the noisy stream. Taking them back after they had drunk their fill he looked over at the mound to which Suarra had gone. There at its base stood a small square tent, glimmering in the twilight like silk and fastened to the ground at each corner by a golden peg. Tethered close to it was the white llama, placidly munching grass and grain. Its hampers of woven golden withes were gone. Nor was Suarra or the hooded men visible. They were in the little tent, he supposed, whence they had carried the precious cargo off the llama.

At his own hillock a fire was crackling and supper being prepared. Sterrett jerked a thumb over toward the little tent.

"Got it out of the saddlebags," he said. "Looked like a folded up umbrella and went up like one. Who'd ever think to find anything like that in this wilderness!"

"Lots of things I t'ink in those saddlebags we have not yet seen maybe," whispered Dancré, an eager, covetous light in his eyes.

"You bet," said Soames. "And the loot we have seen's enough to set us all up for life, eh, Graydon?"

"She has promised you much more," answered Graydon. There was an undercurrent of sinister meaning in the New Englander's voice that troubled him.

"Yeah," said Soames, absently. "Yeah. I guess so. But—well, let's eat."

The four sat around the burning sticks

as they had done many nights before his quarrel with Sterrett. And to Graydon's perplexity they ignored that weird tragedy of the plain. They pushed it aside, passed it by, seemed to avoid it. Their talk was all of treasure—and of what they would do with it when out of these mountains and back in their own world. Piece by piece they went over the golden hoard in the white llama's packs; gloatingly they discussed Suarra's emeralds and their worth.

"Hell! With just those emeralds none of us'd have to worry!" exclaimed Sterrett.

Graydon listened to them with increasing disquiet. They were mad with the gold lust—but there was something more behind their studied avoidance of the dragging down of the scarlet thing by the dinosaurs, this constant reference to the llama's treasure, the harking back to what ease and comfort and luxury it would bring them all; something lurking unsaid in the minds of the three of them of which all this was but the preliminary.

At last Soames looked at his watch.

"Nearly eight," he said, abruptly. "Dawn breaks about five. Time to talk turkey. Graydon, come up close."

Graydon obeyed, wondering. The four drew into a cluster in the shelter of the knoll. From where they crouched Suarra's tent was hidden—as they were hidden to any watchers in that little silken pavilion looking now like a great golden moth at rest under the moonlight.

"Graydon," began the New Englander, "we've made up our minds on this thing. We're goin' to do it a little different. We're willin' and glad to let by-gones be by-gones. Hell! Here we are, four white men in a bunch of God knows what. White men out to stick together. Ain't that so?"

Graydon nodded, waiting.

"All right," went on Soames. "Now here's the situation. I don't deny we're up against somethin' I don't know much about. We ain't equipped to go up against anything like that pack of hissin' devils we saw to-day. But—we can come back!"

Again Graydon nodded. They had decided then to go no farther. The lesson of the afternoon had not been lost. Soames would ask Suarra to lead them out of the

haunted Cordillera. As for coming back—that was another matter. He would return. But he would come back alone—seek Suarra, since well he knew no mysterious peril either to life or soul could keep him from her. But first he must see these men safe, wipe off the debt that he believed as one man of his race to another he owed them. He was glad—but the gladness was tempered with sudden doubt. Could the game be finished thus? Would Suarra and that pair of strange old men let them—go?

Soames' next words brought him back to reality.

THREE'S enough stuff on that llama and the girl to set us all up right, yeah. But there's also enough to finance the greatest little expedition that ever struck the trail for treasure," he was saying. "And that's what we plan doin', Graydon. Get those hampers and all that's in 'em. Get the stuff on the girl. Beat it. An' come back. I'll bet those hissin' devils wouldn't stand up long under a couple of machine guns and some gas bombs! And when the smoke's cleared away we can lift all we want and go back and sit on the top of the world. What you say to that?"

Graydon fenced.

"How will you get it?" he asked. "How will you get away with it?"

"Easy," Soames bent his head closer. "We got it all planned. There ain't any watch bein' kept in that tent, you can bet on that. They're too sure of us. All right, if you're with us, we'll just slip quietly down there. Sterrett and Danc' they'll take care of the old devils. No shootin'. Just slip their knives into their ribs. Me and you'll attend to the girl. We won't hurt her. Just tie her up and gag her. Then we'll stow the stuff on a couple of burros, get rid of the rest and that damned white beast and beat it quick."

"Beat it where?" asked Graydon, striving to cover the hot anger that welled up in him. He slipped a little closer to Danc', hand alert to seize the automatic in his pocket.

"We'll get out," replied Soames, confidently. "I've been figurin' out where we are and I saw a peak to the west there both Sterrett and me recognized. Looked

like pretty open forest country between us, too. Once we're there I know where we are. And travellin' light and all night we can be well on our way to it by this time tomorrow."

Graydon thrust out a cautious hand, touched Danc'e's pocket. The automatic was still here. He would try one last appeal—to fear.

"But, Soames," he urged. "There would be pursuit. What would we do with those brutes you saw today on our track? Why, man, they'd be after us in no time. You can't get away with anything like that."

Instantly he realized the weakness of that argument.

"Not a bit of it," Soames grinned evilly. "That's just the point. Nobody's worryin' about that girl. Nobody knows where she is. She was damned anxious not to be seen this afternoon. No, Graydon, I figure she slipped away from her folks to help you out. I take my hat off to you—you got her sure hooked. Nobody knows where she is, and she don't want nobody to know where she is. The only ones that might raise trouble is the two old devils. And a quick knife in their ribs'll put them out of the runnin' soon enough. Then there's only the girl. She'll be damned glad to show us the way out if chance we do get lost again. But me and Sterrett know that peak. We'll carry her along and when we get where we know we are we'll turn her loose to go home. None the worse off, eh, boys?"

Sterrett and Danc'e nodded.

Graydon seemed to consider, fighting still for time. He knew exactly what was in Soames' mind—to use him in the cold blooded murder the three had planned and, once beyond the reach of pursuit, to murder him, too. Nor would they ever allow Suarra to return to tell what they had done. She too would be slain—after they had done as they willed with her.

"Come on, Graydon," whispered Soames impatiently. "It's a good scheme and we can work it. Are you with us? If you ain't—well—"

His knife glittered in his hand. Simultaneously, Sterrett and Danc'e pressed close to him, knives too, in readiness, awaiting his answer.

Their movement had given him the one

advantage he needed. He swept his hand down into the Frenchman's pocket, drew out the gun and as he did so, landed a sidewise kick that caught Sterrett squarely in the stomach. The giant fell back.

But before Graydon could cover Soames, Dancré's arms were around his knees, his feet torn from beneath him.

"Suar—" Graydon cried before he was down. At least his shout might waken and warn her. The cry was choked in mid-utterance. Soames' bony hand was at his throat. Down they crashed together.

Graydon reached up, tried to break the strangling clutch. It gave a little, enough to let him gasp in one breath. Instantly he dropped his hold on the New Englander's wrists, hooked the fingers of one hand in the corner of his mouth, pulling with all his strength. There was a sputtering curse from Soames and his hands let go. Graydon tried to spring to his feet, but one arm of the gaunt man slipped over the back of his head held his neck in the vise of bent elbow against his shoulder.

"Knife him, Danc'," growled Soames.

Graydon suddenly twisted, bringing the New Englander on top of him. He was only in time for as he did so he saw Dancré strike, the blade barely missing Soames. The latter locked his legs around his, tried to jerk him over in range of the little Frenchman. Graydon sank his teeth in the shoulder so close to him. Soames roared with pain and wrath; threshed and rolled, trying to shake off the agonizing grip. Around them danced Dancré, awaiting a chance to thrust.

There came a bellow from Sterrett:

"The llama! It's running away! The llama!"

Involuntarily, Graydon loosed his jaws. Soames sprang to his feet. Graydon followed on the instant, shoulder up to meet the blow he expected from Dancré.

"Look, Soames, look!" the little Frenchman was pointing. "They have put the hampers back and turned him loose. There he goes—wit' the gold—wit' the jewels!"

Graydon followed the pointing finger. The moon had gathered strength and under its flood the white sands had turned into a silver lake in which the tufted hillocks stood up like tiny islands. Golden

hampers on its sides, the llama was flitting across that lake of silver a hundred paces away and headed, apparently, for the trail along which they had come.

"Stop it!" shouted Soames, all else forgotten. "After it, Sterrett! That way, Danc'! I'll head it off!"

They raced out over the shining barren. The llama changed its pace; trotted leisurely to one of the mounds and bounded up to its top.

"Close in! We've got it now," he heard Soames cry. The three ran to the hillock on which the white beast stood looking calmly around. They swarmed up the mound from three sides. Soames and Sterrett he could see; Dancré was hidden by the slope.

AS THEIR feet touched the sparse grass a mellow sound rang out, one of those elfin horns Graydon had heard chorusing so joyously about Suarra that first day. It was answered by others, close, all about. Again the single note. And then the answering chorus swirled toward the hillock of the llama, hovered over it and darted like a shower of winged sounds upon it.

He saw Sterrett stagger as though under some swift shock; whirl knotted arms around him as though to ward off attack!

A moment the giant stood thus, flailing with his arms. Then he cast himself to the ground and rolled down to the sands. Instantly the notes of the elfin horns seemed to swarm away from him, to concentrate around Soames. He had staggered, too, under the unseen attack. But he had thrown himself face downward on the slope of the mound and was doggedly crawling to its top. He held one arm shielding his face.

But shielding against what?

All that Graydon could see was the hillock top, and on it the llama bathed in the moonlight, the giant prone at the foot of the mound and Soames now nearly at its crest. And the horn sounds were ringing, scores upon scores of them, like the horns of a fairy hunt. But what it was that made those sounds he could not see. They were not visible; they cast no shadow.

Yet once he thought he heard a whirring as of hundreds of feathery wings.

Soames had reached the edge of the mound's flat summit. The llama bent its head, contemplating him. Then as he scrambled over that edge, thrust out a hand to grasp its bridle, it flicked about, sprang to the opposite side and leaped down to the sands.

And all that time the clamor of the elfin horns about Soames had never stilled. Graydon saw him wince, strike out, bend his head and guard his eyes as though from a shower of blows. Still he could see nothing. Whatever that attack of the invisible, it did not daunt the New Englander. He sprang across the mound and slid down its side close behind the llama. As he touched the ground Sterrett arose slowly to his feet. The giant stood swaying, half drunkenly, dazed.

The horn notes ceased, abruptly, as though they had been candlelights blown out by a sudden blast.

Dancré came running around the slope of the hillock. The three stood for a second or two, arguing, gesticulating. And Graydon saw that their shirts were ragged and torn and, as Soames shifted and the moonlight fell upon him, that his face was streaked with blood.

The llama was walking leisurely across the sands, as slowly as though it were tempting them to further pursuit. Strange, too, he thought, how its shape seemed not to stand forth sharply and now to fade almost to a ghostly tenuity. And when it reappeared it was as though the moonbeams thickened, whirled and wove swiftly and spun it from themselves. The llama faded and then grew again on the silvery warp and woof of the rays like a pattern on an enchanted loom.

Sterrett's hand swept down to his belt. Before he could cover the white beast with the automatic Soames caught his wrist. The New Englander spoke fiercely, wrathfully. Graydon knew that he was warning the giant of the danger of the pistol crack; urging silence.

Then the three scattered, Dancré and Sterrett to the left and right to flank the llama, Soames approaching it with what speed he might without startling it into a run. As he neared it, the animal broke into a gentle lope, heading for another hillock. And, as before, it bounded up through the sparse grass to the top. The

three pursued, but as their feet touched the base of the mound once more the mellow horn sounded—menacingly, mockingly. They hesitated. And then Sterrett, breaking from Soames' control, lifted his pistol and fired. The silver llama fell.

"The fool! The damned fool!" groaned Graydon.

The stunned silence that had followed on the heels of the pistol shot was broken by a hurricane of elfin horns. They swept down upon the three like a tempest. Dancré shrieked and ran toward the campfire, beating the air wildly as he came. Halfway he fell, writhed and lay still. And Soames and the giant—they, too, were buffeting the air with great blows, ducking, dodging. The elfin horns were now a ringing, raging tumult—death in their notes!

Sterrett dropped to his knees, arose and lurched away. He fell again close to Dancré's body, covered his head with a last despairing gesture and lay—as still as the little Frenchman. And now Soames went down, fighting to the last.

There on the sands lay the three of them, motionless, struck down by the invisible!

Graydon shook himself into action; leaped forward. He felt a touch upon his shoulder; a tingling numbness ran through every muscle. With difficulty he turned his head. Beside him was the old man in the blue robe, and it had been the touch of his staff that had sent the paralysis through Graydon. The picture of the clutching talons of the spider-man upon the edge of the rimmed road flashed before him. That same rod had then, as he had thought, sent the weird weaver to its death.

Simultaneously, as though at some command, the clamor of the elfin horns lifted from the sands, swirled upward and hung high in air—whimpering, whining, protesting.

He felt a soft hand close around his wrist. Suarra's hand. Again he forced his reluctant head to turn. She was at his right—and pointing.

On the top of the hillock the white llama was struggling to its feet. A band of crimson ran across its silvery flank, the mark of Sterrett's bullet. The animal swayed, then limped down the hill.

As it passed Soames it nosed him. The New Englander's head lifted. He tried to rise; fell back. Then with eyes fastened upon the golden panniers he squirmed up on hands and knees and began to crawl on the white llama's tracks. His eyes never left the gold.

The beast went slowly, stiffly. It came to Sterrett's body and paused again. And Sterrett's massive head lifted, and he tried to rise, and failing even as had Soames, began, like him, to crawl behind the animal.

The white llama passed Dancré. He stirred and moved and followed it on knees and hands.

Over the moon soaked sands, back to the camp they trailed the limping llama, with the blood dripping drop by drop from its wounded side. Behind it three crawling men, their haggard, burning eyes riveted upon the golden withed panniers, three men who crawled, gasping like fish drawn up to shore. Three broken men, from whose drawn faces glared that soul of greed which was all that gave them strength to drag their bodies over the sands.

CHAPTER 7

"Come Back—Graydon!"

NOW llama and crawling men had reached the camp. The elfin horn notes were still. Graydon's muscles suddenly relaxed; power of movement returned to him.

With a little cry of pity Suarra ran to the white llama's side; caressed it, strove to stanch its blood.

Graydon bent down over the three men. They had collapsed as they had come within the circle of the camp fire. They lay now, huddled, breathing heavily, eyes fast closed. Their clothes had been ripped to ribbons.

And over all their faces, their breasts, their bodies, were scores of small punctures, not deep, their edges clean cut, as though they had been pecked out. Some were still bleeding; in others the blood had dried.

He ran to the rushing brook. Suarra was beside her tent, the llama's head in her arms. He stopped, unbuckled the panniers; let them slip away; probed the

animal's wound. The bullet had plowed through the upper left flank without touching the bone, and had come out. He went back to his own camp, drew forth from his bags some medical supplies returned and bathed and dressed the wound as best he could. He did it all silently, and Suarra was silent, too.

Her eyes were eloquent enough.

This finished, he went again to the other camp. The three men were lying as he left them. They seemed to be in a stupor. He washed their faces of the blood, bathed their stained bodies. He spread blankets and dragged the three up on them. They did not awaken. He wondered at their sleep—or was it coma?

The strange punctures were bad enough, of course, yet it did not seem to him that these could account for the condition of the men. Certainly they had not lost enough blood to cause unconsciousness. Nor had any arteries been opened, nor was one of the wounds deep enough to have disturbed any vital organ.

He gave up conjecturing, wearily. After all, what was it but one more of the mysteries among which he had been moving. And he had done all he could for the three of them.

Graydon walked away from the fire, threw himself down on the edge of the white sands. There was a foreboding upon him, a sense of doom.

And as he sat there, fighting against the blackness gathering around his spirit, he heard light footsteps and Suarra sank beside him. Her cloudy hair caressed his cheek, her rounded shoulder touched his own. His hand dropped upon hers, covering it. And after a shy moment her fingers moved, then interlaced with his.

"It is the last night—Graydon," she whispered tremulously. "The last night! And so—they—have let me talk with you a while."

"No!" he caught her to him—fiercely. "There is nothing that can keep me from you now, Suarra, except—death."

"Yes," she said, and thrust him gently away. "Yes—it is the last night. There was a promise—Graydon. A promise that I made. I said that I would save you if I could. I asked the Two Lords. They were amused. They told me that if you could conquer the Face you would be allowed

to go. I told them that you would conquer it. And I promised them that after that you would go. And they were more amused asking me what manner of man you were who had made me believe you could conquer the Face."

"The Face?" questioned Graydon.

"The great Face," she said. "The Face in the Abyss. But of that I may say no more. You must—meet it."

"And these men, too?" he asked. "The men who lie there?"

"They are already dead," she answered, indifferently. "Dead—and worse. They are already eaten!"

"Eaten!" he cried incredulously.

"Eaten," she repeated. "Eaten—body and soul!"

For a moment she was silent.

"I do not think," she began again. "I did not really think—that even you could conquer the Face. So I went to the Snake Mother—and she, too, laughed. But at the end, as woman to woman—since after all she is woman—she promised me to aid you. And then I knew you would be saved since the Snake Mother far excels the Two Lords in craft and guile. And she promised me—as woman to woman. The Two Lords know nothing of that," she added naively.

Of this, Graydon, remembering the youthful eyes in the old, old faces that had weighed him in the temple of the shifting rays, had his doubts.

"So," she said, "was the bargain made. And so its terms must be fulfilled. You shall escape the Face—Graydon. But you must go."

To that he answered nothing. And after another silence she spoke again wistfully:

"Is there any maid who loves you—or whom you love—in your own land, Graydon?"

"There is none, Suarra," he answered.

"I believe you," she said simply. "And I would go away with you—if I might. But—they—would not allow it. And if I tried—they would slay you. Yes, even if we should escape—they—would slay you and bring me back. So it cannot be."

He thrilled to that, innocently self-revelant as it was.

"I am weary of Yu-Atlanchi," she went on somberly. "Yes, I am weary of its ancient wisdom and of its treasures and its people who are eternal—eternal at least as the world. I am one of them and yet I long to go out into the new world—the world where there are babes, and many of them, and the laughter of children, and where life streams passionately, strong and shouting and swiftly—even though it is through the opened doors of Death that it flows. In Yu-Atlanchi those doors are closed—except to those who choose to open them. And life is a still stream, without movement. And there are few babes—and the laughter of children—little."

"What are your people, Suarra?" he asked.

"THE ancient people," she told him.

"The most ancient. Ages upon ages ago they came down from the north where they had dwelt for other ages still. They were driven away by the great cold. One day the earth rocked and swung. It was then the great cold came down and the darkness and icy tempests and even the warm seas began to freeze. Their cities,

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so legends run, are hidden now under mountains of ice. They journeyed south in their ships, bearing with them the Serpent people who gave them most of their wisdom—and the Snake Mother is the last daughter of that people. They came to rest here. At that time the sea was close and the mountains had not yet been born. They found here hordes of the Xinli. They were larger, far larger than now. My people subdued them and tamed and bred them to their uses. And here for another age they practiced their arts and their wisdom—and learned more.

"Then there were great earth shakings and the mountains began to lift. Although all their wisdom was not great enough to keep the montains from being born, it could control their growth around that ancient city, and its plain that were Yu-Atlanchi. Slowly, steadily through another age the mountains arose. Until at last they girdled Yu-Atlanchi like a vast wall—a wall that could never be scaled. Nor did my people care; indeed, it gladdened them, since by then they had closed the doors of death and cared no more to go into the outer world. And so they have dwelt—for many ages more."

Again she was silent, musing. Graydon struggled against his incredulity. A people who had conquered death? A people so old that their birthplace was buried deep beneath the eternal ice? And yet, as to the last, at least—why not? Did not science teach that the frozen poles had once basked beneath a tropical sun? Expeditions had found at both of them the fossil forms of gigantic palms, strange animals, a flora and a fauna that could only have lived under tropical conditions.

And did not science believe that long, long ago the earth had tipped and that thus the frozen poles had come to be?

And inexplicable irritation filled him—instinctive revolt of the young against the very old.

"If your poeple are so wise," he questioned, "why do they not come forth and rule this world?"

"But why should they?" she asked in turn. "They have nothing more to learn. If they came forth what could they do but build the rest of the earth into likeness of that part in which they dwell? What use in that, Graydon? None. So

they let the years stream by while they dream—the most of them. For they have conquered dream. Through dream they create their own worlds; do therein as they will; live life upon life as they will it. In their dreams they shape world upon world upon world—and each of their worlds is a real world to them. And so they let the years stream by while they live in dream! Why should they go out into this one world when they can create myriads of their own at will?"

Again she was silent.

"But they are barren—the dream makers," she whispered. "Barren! That is why there are few babes and little laughter of children in Yu-Atlanchi. Why should they mate with their kind—these women and men who have lived so long that they have grown weary of all their kind can give them? Why should they mate with their kind when they can create new lovers in dream, new loves and hates! Yea, new emotions, and forms utterly unknown to earth, each as he or she may will. And so they are—barren. Not alone the doors of death, but the doors of life are closed to them—the dream makers!"

"But you—" he began.

"I?" She turned a wistful face to him. "Did I not say that when they closed the doors of death the doors of life closed, too. For these are not really two, but only the two sides of the one door. Some there are always who elect to keep that door open, to live the life that is their own, to have no dealing with—dreams. My father and mother were these. They took the hazard of death that they might love. . . .

"Ancient arts—ancient wisdom," she went on. "Wisdom perhaps you have rediscovered and call new. Wisdom you yet may gain. Wisdom that may never be yours—and thank whatever gods you worship that you have not; pray to them that you never may have."

"Such wisdom as shaped the—weaver?" he asked.

"That! He was child's play," she answered. "A useful toy. There are far, far stranger things than the weaver in Yu-Atlanchi, Graydon."

"Suarra," he asked abruptly. "Why do you want to save me?"

A moment she hesitated; then:

"Because you make me feel as I have

never felt before!" she whispered slowly. "Because you make me happy—because you make me sorrowful. When I think of you it is like warm wine in my veins. I want both to sing—and to weep. I want your touch—to be close to you. When you go—the world will be darkened—life will be drab."

"Suarra!" he cried—and drew her, unresisting now, to him. His lips sought hers and her lips clung to his. A flame leaped through him. She quivered in his arms; was still.

"I will come back," he whispered. "I will come back, Suarra!"

"Come!" she sobbed. "Come back—Graydon!"

She thrust him from her—leaped to her feet.

"No! No!" she cried. "No—Graydon. I am wicked! No—it would be death for you!"

"As God lives, Suarra," he said, "I will come back to you!"

She trembled; leaned forward, pressed her lips to his, slipped through his arms and ran to the silken pavilion. For an instant she paused there—stretched wistful arms to him; entered and was hidden within its folds.

There seemed to come to him, faintly, heard only by heart—

"Come back! Come back to me!"

He threw himself down where their hands had clasped—where their lips had met. Hour after hour he lay there—thinking, thinking. His head dropped forward at last.

He carried her into his dreams.

CHAPTER 8

The Face in the Abyss

THE white sands of the barren were warm in the first gleaming of the dawn when Graydon awoke. He arose with the thought of Suarra warm around his heart. Chilling that warmth, swift upon him like a pall fell that bleak consciousness of doom against which he had struggled before he slept; and bleaker, heavier now; not to be denied.

A wind was sweeping down from the heights. Beneath it he shivered. He walked to the hidden brook; doffed clothing;

dipped beneath its icy flow. Strength poured back into him at the touch of the chill current.

Returning, he saw Suarra, less than half clad, slipping out of the silken tent. Clearly, she too, was bound for the brook. He waved a hand. She smiled; then long silken lashes covered the midnight eyes; rose-pearl grew her face, her throat. She slipped back behind the silken folds.

He turned his head from her; passed on to the camp.

He looked down upon the three—gaunt Soames, little Dancré, giant Sterrett. He stooped and plucked from Soames' belt an automatic—his own. He satisfied himself that it was properly loaded, and thrust it into his pocket. Under Soames' left arm pit was another. He took it out and put it in the holster from which he had withdrawn his. He slipped into Sterrett's a new magazine of cartridges. Dancré's gun was ready for use.

"They'll have their chance, anyway," he said to himself.

He stood over them for a moment; scanned them. The scores of tiny punctures had closed. Their breathing was normal. They seemed to be asleep and yet—they looked like dead men. Like dead men, livid and wan and bloodless as the pallid sands beneath the growing dawn.

Graydon shuddered; turned his back upon them.

He made coffee; threw together a breakfast; went back to rouse the three. He found Soames sitting up, looking around him, dazedly.

"Come get something to eat, Soames," he said, and gently, for there was helplessness about the gaunt man that roused his pity—black hearted even, as the New Englander had shown himself. Soames looked at him, blankly; then stumbled up and stood staring, as though waiting further command. Graydon leaned down and shook Starrett by the shoulder. The giant mumbled, opened dull eyes; lurched to his feet. Dancré awakened, whimpering.

As they stood before him—gaunt man, little man, giant—wonder, a fearful wonder, seized him. For these were not the men he had known. No! What was it that had changed these men so, sapped the life from them until they seemed, even as

Suarra had said to him, already dead?

A verse from the Rime of the Ancient Mariner rang in his ears—

*They groaned, they stirred, they all uprose,
Nor spake, nor moved their eyes;
It had been strange, even in a dream,
To have seen those dead men rise.*

Shuddering again, he led the way to the fire. They followed him, stiffly, mechanically, like automatons. And like automatons they took the steaming coffee from him and drank it; the food and swallowed it. Their eyes, blank, devoid of all expression, followed his every movement.

Graydon studied them, the fear filled wonder growing. They seemed to hear nothing, see nothing—save for their recognition of himself—to be cut off from all the world. Suddenly he became conscious of others near him; turned his head and saw close behind him Suarra and the hooded pair. The eyes of Soames, of Sterrett and of Dancré turned with his own. And now he knew that not even memory had been left them! Blankly, with no recognition—unseeing—they stared at Suarra.

"It is time to start, Graydon," she said softly, her own eyes averted from their dead gaze. "We leave the llama here. It cannot walk. Take with you only your own animal, your weapons and what belongs to you. The other animals will stay here."

He chilled, for under her words he read both sentence of death and of banishment. Death of all of them perhaps—banishment for himself even if he escaped death. In his face she read his heart, accurately; tried to soften his sorrow.

"They may escape," she continued, hastily. "And if they do, the animals will be here awaiting them. And it is well for you to have your own with you, in case—in case—"

She faltered. He shook his head.

"No use, Suarra," he smiled. "I understand."

"Oh, trust me, trust me," she half sobbed. "Do as I say, Graydon."

He said no more. He unhobbed his burro; fixed the saddlebags; took his own rifle and strapped it to them. He picked up the rifles of the others and put them

in their hands. They took them, as mechanically as they had the coffee and the food.

Now blue cowl and yellow swung into the lead, Suarra at their heels.

"Come on, Soames," he said. "Come, Sterrett. It's time to start, Dancré."

Obediently they swung upon the trail, marching side by side—gaunt man at left, giant in the center, little man at right. Like marionettes they marched, obediently, unquestioning, without word. If they knew the llama and its treasures were no longer with them, they gave no sign. If they knew Graydon again carried his guns, they gave no sign either.

Another line of the "Rime" echoed in his memory—

They raised their limbs like lifeless tools—

Graydon swung in behind them, the patient burro trotting at his side.

They crossed the white sands, entering a broad way, stretching through the close growing, enormous trees, as though it had once been a road of stone upon whose long deserted surface the leaves had rotted for centuries; upon which turf had formed, but in which no trees had been able to get root hold. And as they went on, he had evidence that it had been actually such a road, for where there had been washouts the faces of gigantic cut and squared blocks were exposed.

FOR an hour they passed along this ancient burial trail. They emerged from it, abruptly, out upon a broad platform of bare rock. Before them were the walls of a split mountain. Its precipices towered thousands of feet. Between them, like a titanic sword cut, was a rift, a prodigious cleavage which widened as it reached upward as though each side had shrunk away from the splitting blade as it had struck downward. The platform was the threshold of this rift. Fifty feet wide from edge to edge it ran. At each edge stood a small, conical shaped building—temple or guard house—whose crumbling stones were covered with a gray lichen so ancient looking that it might have been withered old Time's own flower.

The cowled figures neither turned nor stopped. They crossed the threshold between the ruined cones; behind them Suarra; and after her, never hesitating, the stiffly marching three. Then over it went Graydon and the burro.

The way led downward at an angle barely saved from difficult steepness. No trees, no vegetation of any kind, could be seen—unless the ancient, gray and dry lichen that covered the road and whispered under their feet could be called vegetation. But it gave resistance, that lichen; made the descent easier. It covered the straight rock walls that arose on each side.

The gorge was dark, as he had expected. The light that fell through its rim thousands of feet overhead was faint. But the gray lichens seemed to take it up and diffuse it. It was no darker than an early nothern twilight. Every object was plainly visible.

Down they went and ever down; for half an hour; an hour. Always straight ahead the road stretched, never varying in its width and growing no darker, even the gray lichens lightened it. He estimated its drop was about fifteen feet in the hundred. He looked back and upward along its narrowing vista. There must be, he thought, half a mile or more below the level of the rift threshold.

The road angled, a piece of rock jutted abruptly out of the cliff, stretching from side to side like a barrier. The new road was narrower, barely wide enough for the three marionettes in front to walk on side by side. As they wheeled into it Graydon again felt a pang of pity. They were like doomed men marching to execution; hope-

less; helpless and—drugged. Nay—they were men who had once been slain and drawn inexorably on to a second death!

Never speaking, never turning, with mechanical swing of feet, rifles held slack in limp arms, their march was a grotesquerie tinged with horror.

The new road was darker than the old. He had an uneasy feeling that the rocks were closing high over his head; that what they were entering was a tunnel. The gray lichens rapidly dwindled on walls and underfoot. As they dwindled, so did the light.

At last the gray lichens ceased to be. He moved through a half darkness in which barely could he see, save as shadows, those who went before.

And now he was sure the rocks had closed overhead, burying them. He fought against a choking oppression that came with the knowledge.

And yet it was not so dark, after all. Strange, he thought, strange that there should be light at all in this covered way—and stranger still was that light itself. It seemed to be in the air—to be of the air. It came neither from walls nor roof. It seemed to filter in, creeping, along the tunnel from some source far ahead. A light that was as though it came from radiant atoms, infinitely small, that shed their rays as they floated slowly by.

Thicker grew these luminous atoms whose radiance only, and not their bodies, could be perceived by the eye. Lighter and lighter grew the way.

Again, and as abruptly as before, it turned.

They stood within a vern that was like a great square auditorium to some gigan-



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tic stage; the interior of a cube of rock whose four sides, whose roof a hundred feet overhead, and whose floor were smooth and straight as though trued by a giant spirit level and by a plane.

And at his right dropped a vast curtain—a curtain of solid rock lifted a foot above the floor and drawn aside at the far end for a quarter of its sweep. From beneath it and from the side, streamed the radiant atoms whose slow drift down the tunnel had filled it with its ever increasing luminosity.

They streamed from beneath it and around the side, swiftly now, like countless swarms of fireflies, each carrying a lamp of diamond light.

"There"—Suarra pointed to the rocky curtain's edge—"there lies your way. Beyond it is that place I promised I would show you—the place where the jewels grow like fruit in a garden and the living gold flows forth. Here we will wait you. Now go."

Long Graydon looked at that curtain and at the streaming radiant atoms pouring from beyond it. Gaunt man, little man, giant man stood, beside him, soulless faces staring at him—waiting his command, his movement.

In the hooded pair he sensed a cynical amusement—in yellow cowl, at least. For blue cowl seemed but to wait—as though—as though even now he knew what the issue must be. Were they baiting him, he wondered; playing him for their amusement? What would happen if he were to refuse to go farther; refuse to walk around the edge of that lifted curtain; summon the three and march them back to the little camp in the barren? Would they go? Would they be allowed to go?

He looked at Suarra. In her eyes of midnight velvet was sorrow, a sorrow unutterable; despair and agony—and love!

Whatever moved that pair she called the Two Lords—in her, at least, was no cynical gaming with human souls. And he remembered her promise—that he could look upon the Face and conquer it.

WELL, he would not retreat now, even if they would let him. He would accept no largess at the hands of this pair who, or so it now seemed to him, looked upon her as a child who must be taught

what futile thing it was that she had picked for chosen toy. He would not shame himself—nor her.

"Wait here," he spoke to the three staring ones. "Wait here—do you understand Soames—Dancré—Sterrett! Do not move! Wait here until I come back."

They only stared on at him; unanswering either with tongue or face.

"Stay here!" he repeated sharply.

He walked up to the hooded pair.

"To hell with you!" he said, clearly and as coldly as he felt they themselves might speak were they to open those silent lips of theirs. "Do you understand that? I said to hell with you!"

They did not move. He caught Suarra in his arms; kissed her; suddenly reckless of them. He felt her lips cling to his.

"Remember!" he whispered. "I will come back to you!"

He strode over to the curtain's edge, swinging his automatic as he went. He strode past the edge and full into the rush of the radiance. For perhaps a dozen heart beats he stood there, motionless, turned to stone, blank incredulity stamped deep upon his face. And then the revolver dropped from his nerveless hand; clattered upon a floor of stone.

For Graydon looked into a vast cavern filled with the diamonded atoms, throbbing with a dazzling light that yet was crystalline clear. The cavern was like a gigantic, hollow globe that had been cut in two, and one half cast away. It was from its curving walls that the luminosity streamed and these walls were jetty black and polished like mirrors, and the rays that issued from them seemed to come from infinite depths within them, darting through them with prodigious speed—like rays shot up through inconceivable depths of black water, beneath which in some unknown firmament, blazed a sun of diamond incandescence.

And out of these curving walls, hanging to them like the grapes of precious jewels in the enchanted vineyards of the Paradise of El-Shiraz, like flowers in a garden of the King of the Djinn, grew clustered gems!

Great crystals, cabochon and edged, globular and angled, alive under the jubilant light with the very soul of fire that is the lure of jewel. Rubies that glowed with

every rubrous tint from that clear scarlet that is sunlight streaming through the finger tips of delicate maids to deepest sullen reds of bruised hearts; sapphires that shone with blues as rare as that beneath the bluebird's wings and blues as deep as those which darken beneath the creamy crest of the Gulf Stream's crisping waves; huge emeralds that gleamed now with the peacock verdancies of tropic shallows, and now were green as the depths of a jungle glade; diamonds that glittered with irised fires or shot forth showers of rainbowed rays; great burning opals; gems burning with amethystine flames; unknown jewels whose unfamiliar beauty checked the heart with wonder.

But it was not the clustered jewels within this chamber of radiance that had released the grip of his hand upon the automatic; turned him into stone.

It was—the Face!

From where he stood a flight of Cyclopean steps ran down a hundred feet or more into the heart of the cavern. At their left was the semiglobe of gemmed and glittering rock. At their right was—space!

An abyss, whose other side he could not see, but which fell sheer away from the stairway in bottomless depth upon depth.

The Face looked at him from the far side of this cavern. Its eyes were level with his. Bodiless, its chin rested upon the floor a little beyond the last monolithic step. It was carved out of the same black rock as the walls, but within it was no faintest sparkle of the darting luminescences.

It was a man's face and devil's face in one; Luciferian; arrogant; ruthless. Colossal, thirty yards or more in width from ear to ear, it bent a little over the abyss, as though listening. Upon the broad brow power was throned, an evil and imperial power—power that could have been godlike in beneficence had it so willed, but which had chosen instead the lot of Satan. The nose was harpy curved, vulture bridged and cruel. Merciless was the huge mouth, the lips full and lecherous; the corners cynical, drooping.

Upon all its carved features was stamped the very secret soul of humanity's insatiable, eternal hunger for gold. Greed and avarice were graven there—and spendthrift recklessness and callous waste. It

was the golden lust given voice of stone. It promised, it lured, it threatened, it cajoled. And it—summoned!

He looked into the eyes of the Face, a hundred feet above the chin. They were made of pale blue crystals, cold as the glint of the Polar ice. Within them was centered all the Face's demoniac strength.

And as Graydon glared into their chill depths swift visions passed from them to his own. Ravishing of cities and looting of ships, men drunk with greed wrestling great golden nuggets from the bowels of the earth; men crouching like spiders in the hearts of shining yellow webs and gloating over hordes of golden flies.

He heard the shouts of loot crazed legions sacking capitols; the shouting of all Argonauts since first gold and men were born. And he thrilled to their clamor; answered it with shoutings of his own!

Poured into him from the cold eyes other visions—visions of what gold, gold without end, could do for him. Flaming lures of power over men and nations, power limitless and ruthless as that which sat upon the Face's own brow—fair women—earthly Paradises—Fata Morganas of the senses.

There was a fire in his blood, a Satanic ecstasy, a flaming recklessness.

Why—the Face was not of stone! The eyes were not cold jewels!

The Face was living!

And it was promising him this world and dominion over all this world—if he would but come to it!

He took a step down the stairway.

There came to him Suarra's heartbroken cry!

It checked him.

He looked again at the colossal Face.

AND now he saw that all the darting luminous atoms for the curving walls were concentrated upon it. It threw them back, into the chamber and under and past the curtain of rock, and out into the abyss. And that there was a great circlet of gold around the Face's brow—a wide, deep crown almost like a cap. From that crown, like drops of yellow blood, great globes of gold fell slowly! They crept sluggishly down the cheeks.

From the eyes ran slowly other huge golden drops—like tears.

And out of each down turned corner of the mouth the gold dripped like saliva!

The drops of golden sweat, the golden tears, the golden slaver rolled and joined a rivulet of gold that crept out from behind the Face, crawled sluggishly to the verge of the abyss and over its lip into the unfathomable depths—

"Look into my eyes! Look into my eyes!"

The command came to him—imperious, not to be disobeyed. It seemed to him that the Face had spoken it. He stared again straight into the cold blue crystals. And forgotten now was its horror. All that he knew was—its promise!

Graydon dropped to the second step, then to the third. He wanted to run on, straight to that gigantic mask of black rock that sweated, wept and slavered gold, take from it what it had offered—give it whatever it should demand in return—

He was thrust aside. Reeled and caught himself at the very edge of the stair way.

Past him rushed the three—gaunt man, giant man and little man.

He caught a look at their faces. There was no blankness in them now, no vagueness. No, they were as men reborn. Their eyes were burning bright, And upon the face of each was set the stamp of the Face—its arrogance, its avarice, its recklessness and its cruelty.

Faster, faster they ran down the steps—rushing to the gigantic Face and what it had promised them. And it had promised—him!

Rage, murderous and confusing, shook him. By Heaven, they couldn't get away with that! Earth and the dominion of earth! They were his own for the taking. The Face had promised them to him first. He would kill them.

He leaped down behind them.

Something caught his feet, pinioned them, wrapped itself around his knees; brought him to an abrupt halt. He heard a sharp hissing. Raging, cursing, he looked down. Around his ankles, around his knees, were the coils of a white serpent. It bound him tightly like a rope. Its head was level with his heart and its eyes looked unwinkingly into his.

For a breathless moment revulsion shook him, and instinctive, panic terror. He forgot the Face—forgot the three. The

white serpent's head swayed; then shot forward, its gaze fastened upon something beyond him. Graydon's gaze followed its own.

He saw—the Snake Mother!

At one and the same time real and unreal, she lay stretched out upon the radiant air, her shining lengths half coiled. She lay within the air directly between him and the Face. He saw her—and yet plainly through her he could see all that weird cavern and all that it held. Her purple eyes were intent upon him.

And instantly his rage and all the fiery poison of golden lust that had poured into him—were wiped away. In their place flowed contrition, shame, a vast thankfulness.

He remembered—Suarra!

Through this phantom of the Snake Mother—if phantom it was—he stared full and fearlessly into the eyes of the Face. And their spell was broken. All that Graydon saw now was its rapacity, its ruthlessness and its horror.

The white serpent loosed its coils; released him! Slipped away. The phantom of the Snake Mother vanished.

Trembling, he looked down the stairway. The three men were at its end. They were running—running toward the Face. In the crystalline luminosity they stood out like moving figures cut from black cardboard. They were flattened by it—three outlines, sharp as silhouettes cut from black paper. Lank and gaunt silhouette, giant silhouette and little one, they ran side by side. And now they were at the point of the huge chin. He watched them pause there for an instant, striking at each other, each trying to push the others away. Then as one, and as though answering some summons irresistible, they began to climb up the cliffted chin of the Face—climbing Graydon knew up to the cold blue eyes and what those eyes had seemed to promise.

Now they were in the full focus of the driving rays, the storm of the luminous atoms. For an instant they stood out, still like three men cut from cardboard a little darker than the black stone.

Then they seemed to gray, their outlines to grow misty—nebulous. They ceased their climbing. They writhed as though in sudden intolerable agony.

They faded out!

Where they had been there hovered for a breath something like three wisps of stained cloud.

The wisps dissolved—like mist.

In their place stood out three glistening droplets of gold!

Sluggishly the three droplets began to roll down the Face. They drew together and became one. They dripped slowly down to the crawling golden stream, were merged with it—were carried to the lip of the abyss—

And over into the gulf!

From high over that gulf came a burst of elfin horns. And now, in that strange light, Graydon saw at last what it was that sent forth three notes—what it was that had beaten out on the moonlit barren the souls of the three; breaking them; turning them into dead men walking.

Their bodies were serpents, sinuous, writhing and coiling, silver scaled. But they were serpents—winged. They dipped and drifted and eddied on long snow-feathered wings, blanched, phosphorescent plumes fringed like the tails of ghostly Birds of Paradise.

Large and small, some the size of the great python, some no longer than the little fer-de-lance, they writhed and coiled and spun through the sparkling air above the abyss, trumpeting triumphantly, calling to each other with their voices like elfin horns.

Fencing joyously with each other with bills that were like thin, straight swords!

Winged serpents. Paradise plumed, whose bills were sharp rapiers. Winged serpents sending forth their paens of faery trumpets while that crawling stream

of which Soames—Dancré—Sterrett—were now a part, dropped, slowly, so slowly, down into the unfathomable void.

Graydon fell upon the great step, sick in every nerve and fiber of his being. He crept up to the next, and the next—rolled over the last, past the edge of the rocky curtain, out of the brilliancy of the diamonded light and the sight of the Face and that trumpet clamor of the flying serpents.

He saw Suarra, flying to him, eyes wild with gladness.

Then he seemed to sink through wave after wave of darkness into oblivion.

CHAPTER 9

"I Am Going Back to Her!"

GRAYDON awakened, looked up. "Suarra! Beloved!" he whispered, and stretched out eager arms. "Suarra!" he called.

Memory rushed back to him; he leaped to his feet, stared around him. He was in a dim forest glade. Beside him his burro nibbled placidly at the grass.

"Suarra!" he cried again loudly.

A figure stirred in the shadow; came toward him. It was an Indian, but one of a type Graydon had never seen before. His features were delicate, fine. He wore a corselet and kilt of padded yellow silk. There was a circlet of gold upon his head and bracelets of the same metal on his upper arms.

The Indian held out a package wrapped in silk. He opened it. Within it was Suarra's bracelet of the dinosaurs and the caraquenque feather she wore when first he had seen her.



OYSTERMAN FINDS REAL PEARL!

AMAGANSETT, N. Y.—Capt. Ted Lester has discovered a gem among whiskies. "It's Calvert Reserve," he says, "and the day I first tasted it, I switched to Calvert's smoother taste. It's a real find!"

Graydon restored the feather in its covering, thrust it into the pocket over his heart. The bracelet, and why he did it he never knew, he slipped over his own wrist.

He spoke to the Indian in the Aymara. He smiled; shook his head. Nor did he seem to understand any of the half dozen other dialects that Graydon tried. He pointed to the burro and then ahead. Graydon knew that he was telling him that he must go, and that he would show him the way.

They set forth. He tried to etch every foot of the path upon his memory, planning already for return. In a little while they came to the edge of a steep hill, here, the Indian paused, pointing down. Fifty feet or so below him Graydon saw a well marked trail. There was an easy descent, zigzagging down the hillside to it. Again the Indian pointed, and he realized that he was indicating which way to take upon the lower trail.

The Indian stood aside, bowed low and waited for him to pass down with the burro. He began the downward climb. The Indian stood watching him; and as Graydon reached a turn in the trail, he waved his hand in farewell and slipped back into the forest.

Graydon plodded slowly on for perhaps a mile farther. There he waited for an hour. Then he turned resolutely back; retraced his way to the hillside and driving his burro before him, quietly reclimbed it.

In his brain and in his heart were but one thought and one desire—to return to Suarra. No matter what the peril—to go back to her.

He slipped over the edge of the hill and stood there for a moment, listening. He heard nothing. He pushed ahead of the burro; softly bade it follow; strode forward.

Instantly close above his head he heard a horn note sound, menacing, angry. There was a whirring of great wings.

Instinctively he threw up his arm. It was the one upon which he had slipped Suarra's bracelet. As he raised it, the purple stones that were the eyes of the snake woman carved up it, flashed in the sun.

He heard the horn note again, protesting; curiously—startled. There was a

whistling flurry in the air close beside him as of some unseen winged creature strivings frantically to check its flight.

Something struck the bracelet a glancing blow. He felt another sharp blow against his shoulder. A searing pain darted through the muscles. He felt blood rush from shoulder and neck. The buffet threw him backward. He fell and rolled over the edge of the hill and down its side.

In that fall his head struck a stone, stunning him. When he came to his senses he was laying at the foot of the slope, with the burro standing beside him. He must have lain there unconscious for considerable time, for the stained ground showed that he had lost much blood. The wound was in an awkward place for examination, but so far as he could see it was a clean puncture that had passed like a rapier thrust through the upper shoulder and out at the neck. It must have missed the artery by a hair.

And well he knew what had made that sound. One of the feathered serpents of the abyss.

The cliff or hill marked no doubt the limits of Yu-Atlanchi at that point. Had the strange Indian placed the creature there in anticipation of his return, or had it been one of those "Watchers" of whom Suarra had spoken and this frontier one of its regular points of observation? The latter, he was inclined to think, for the Indian had unquestionably been friendly.

And did not the bracelet and the caraqueñue feather show that he had been Suarra's own messenger?

But Graydon could not go back, into the unknown perils, with such a wound. He must find help. That night the fever took him. The next day he met some friendly Indians. They ministered to him as best they could. But the fever grew worse and the wound a torment. He made up his mind to press on to Chupan, the nearest village where he might find better help than the Indians could give him.

He had stumbled on to Chupan, reached it on his last strength.

* * *

Such was Graydon's story.

If you ask me whether I believe it, or whether I think it the vagaries of a fever-stricken wanderer, I answer—I do believe it. Yes, from the first to the last, I believe it true. For remember, I saw his wound, I saw the bracelet of the dinosaurs and I listened to Graydon in his delirium. A man does not tell precisely the same things in the cool blood of health that he raves of in delirium, not at least if these things are but fancies born of that delirium. He cannot. He forgets. But Graydon told the same story.

There was one thing that I found it hard to explain by any normal process.

"You say you saw this—well, Being—you call the Snake Mother as a phantom in that cavern of the Face?" I asked. "But are you sure of that, Graydon? Are you sure that this was not hallucination—or some vision of your fever that you carried into waking?"

"No," he said. "No. I am very sure. I would not call what I saw a phantom. I only used that word to describe it. It was more a projection of her image. You forget, don't you, that other exercise of this inexplicable power of projection the night I was drawn into Yu-Atlanchi by her eyes? Well—of the reality of that first experience there cannot be the slightest doubt. I do not find the other more unbelievable than it.

"The cavern of the Face," he went on, thoughtfully. "That I think was a laboratory of Nature, a gigantic crucible where under certain rays of light a natural transmutation of one element into another took place.

"Within the rock, out of which the Face was carved, was some mineral which under these rays was transformed into gold. A purely chemical process of which our race itself is not far from learning the secret, as you know.

"The Face! I think that it was an after-thought of some genius of Yu-Atlanchi. He had taken the rock, worked upon it and symbolized so accurately man's universal hunger for gold, that inevitably he who looked upon it responded to its call. The sub-consciousness, the consciousness, too, leaped out in response to what the face portrayed with such tremendous power. In proportion to the strength of that hunger,

so was the strength of the response. Like calls to like the world over."

"But do you think that Soames and Sterrett and little Dancré really turned into gold?" I asked him.

"Frankly, of that I have my doubts," he answered. "It looked so. But the whole scene was so—well, so damnably devilish—that I can't quite trust to my impressions of that. It is possible that something else occurred. Unquestionably the concentration of the rays on the region about the Face was terrific. Beneath the bombardment of those radiant particles of force—whatever they were—the bodies of the three may simply have disintegrated. The droplets of gold may have been oozing from the rock behind them and their position in the exact place where the three disappeared may also have been only a vivid coincidence."

"That the flying serpents were visible in that light and not in normal light shows, I should think, that it must have been extraordinarily rich in the ultraviolet vibrations," I suggested.

He nodded.

"Of course that was it," he said. "Invisible in day or night light, it took the violet rays to record their outlines. They are probably a development of some form of flying saurian such as the ancient pterodactyls."

He mused for a moment.

"But they must have possessed a high degree of intelligence," he went on at last, "those serpents. Intelligence higher even than the dog—intelligence perhaps on a par with that of the elephant. The creature that struck me certainly recognized Suarta's bracelet. It was that recognition which checked it, I am sure. It tried to stop its thrust, but it was too late to do more than divert it.

"And that is why I think I am going to find her," he whispered.

"She wanted me to come back. She knew that I would. I think the bracelet is a talisman—or better still, a passport.

"I will come back—and with her," he told me on that day we clasped hands in farewell. I watched him until he and the little burro were hidden by the trees of the trail he must follow.

But he has not come back.

THE GREEN FLAME

A WEIRD NOVELETTE OF SINISTER POWER

By Eric North

Most diabolic of criminals was Toad, whose chilling secret surpassed any human knowledge. Because of it, his power was crushing—more terrible than hatred.

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CHAPTER 1

Human Pyre

MY NAME is Maurice John Murchison. I detest writing, and have been betrayed into this effort only by the sheer horror which infects me whenever I am poisoned by thought of Toad. He called himself only that; and the name may well have been received from the christening hands of Satan.

Not one of the high Australian officials who were concerned in Toad's disarming is now alive. Although they emerged from the ordeal apparently in normal good health, they were dying men. That those who played minor roles in this terrible drama escaped the aftermath of Toad's poison, I can ascribe only to the goodness of Providence.

Yet the world at large never knew the hideously searing extinction it so narrowly missed in those blackest days. Even now I wonder fearfully whether what has

happened may happen again. It seems improbable, yet my common sense tells me the risk is there. I pray that I may be wrong. . . .

Toad comes into being, so far as my own experience is concerned, on an evening late in November. I had arrived by the express from Sydney at midday, with my entire personal possessions contained in two suitcases, and with barely enough money to insure me against a month of idleness.

I was not unduly apprehensive. I was thirty; fairly well equipped with a public school education and some ten years' experience of city and commercial life as seen from the angle of a secretary and a clerk.

I had health and average good looks, and was unencumbered by family responsibility. The world of my choosing was still at my feet, and the ball was in play.

I left my suitcases in the station cloakroom while I sought for comfortable and cheap lodgings. With the guidance of the newspapers I inspected many alleged "homes from home" but found none to my





Toad reeked of insane egotism. Satan, his master, knew the satisfaction such a distinction might afford him.

own definition. They were pretty awful.

I had no delusions about boarding-house life and customs, but never before had I encountered an atmosphere so unattractive and depressing. As a consequence, when night came I was still unsettled.

After I had eaten at a café I fell idly into place in the street throng. The night was clear and the air warm, and a green mill turned slowly against a background of soft sky. Tempted by the quiet of the Alexandra Gardens I followed a white winding pathway to a seat under a small tree thicket, stretched my tired legs and lit my pipe.

I was congratulating myself on being so comfortable when the figure of a man appeared precipitately from a side path. At its junction with the main path he halted and looked eagerly from side to side. Seeing the glow of my pipe, as I suppose, he came rapidly towards me.

He was bareheaded, and his face glimmered oddly in the half light as he paused and peered directly at me.

He said in a pleasant but distinctly agitated voice:

"I beg your pardon. I am in search of a friend. You haven't, by any chance, seen hereabouts an elderly man wearing a dark overcoat and a soft felt hat, and carrying a stick and bundle of papers? He walks very slowly and leans rather noticeably on his stick."

I said: "No, I'm sorry I haven't. You're the first I've seen for nearly ten minutes. No one answering to that description has passed me."

HE SAT on the other end of the seat and lit a cigarette. In the brief spurt of matchlight I saw that he was young—about my own age, or a year or two less. He was smartly dressed, and had the air of a man who is considerably perturbed.

He said, as if thinking aloud: "Perhaps, after all, I'm acting foolishly. He may be unharmed."

"Were you fearing his harm?" I asked.

"Yes and no. I wish—" He appeared suddenly to recollect that he was talking to a stranger, and stood up and stared at me. Possibly my voice reassured him, for he continued, as if glad of an opportunity to confide in someone:

"His heart is weak. He has to take cer-

tain specially ordered medicines. But I was not particularly alluding to that. I—"

The tread of heavy feet brought our heads around simultaneously. My companion exclaimed in a relieved tone: "Here's officer Crampton, one of the park police."

For a second I was blinded by the glare of an electric torch. A voice said: "Who's this? Oh, how are you, Mr. Framling? Anything wrong?"

"Not exactly wrong," Framling replied. I could feel him glance at me doubtfully. "The fact is, I'm looking for Mr. Stephen Gregory. You know him, Crampton, I think. He's director of the Bureau of Chemical Science."

"Is that all your trouble? Yes, I know Mr. Gregory well. I passed him not fifty yards back, coming this way. Here he is now."

Framling muttered something which sounded suspiciously like, "Thank Heaven." He went to meet the newcomer, leaving Crampton to say to me: "A friend of Mr. Framling?"

I said, "No. I just happened to be here when he came looking for this Mr. Gregory. I suppose you wouldn't object to telling me who Mr. Framling is? He seems a good chap."

So, for that matter, was the park policeman. He told me that George Framling was private secretary to the premier, Mr. Morgan Hannaford, and was considered a very able young fellow and a very likeable one. He was the premier's right-hand man in a semi-official sense.

Framling returned to the seat with his Mr. Gregory. The director of the Science Bureau was a man verging on sixty, tall and spare with short iron-gray hair and beard. His voice was mild and his manner hesitating.

He appeared to move in a world of the intellect—a clever, gentle old man, undeserving of a single enemy.

My first impulse was to pass on to find another seat, leaving the three to their conversation in common. I was, however, tired out, and possession rights were clearly mine. Added to this was a frank curiosity to learn what could prompt so personable an official as George Framling to a hatless, agitated search for a scientist of such peaceful persuasion.

And so it was that the horrible thing which happened took place, as it were, at the very core of my understanding.

Young Framling was saying, as they seated themselves: "Why of course not, Mr. Gregory. I said as much to the premier this evening, but he was unusually nervous. Not at all like himself.

"Another of those letters came by the afternoon mail, you see. I was for treating it as a joke, but Mr. Hannaford became very serious. He asked me, in view of the facts of your particular investigation to—well, in short, to keep a bit of an eye on you."

"Toad," said Mr. Gregory, in a quiet, cultured voice, "is sinister and ill-sounding. Perhaps that, Mr. Framling, coupled with the nature of these communications, explains the psychology of the premier's unease. I might say that this morning I received a letter myself."

"You did!" Framling exclaimed—incredulously, I thought. "A letter with that signature, Mr. Gregory?"

"My dear boy," said the old gentleman—and I saw his thin hand go out to touch Framling's arm in a gesture that was singularly sweet—"my dear Framling, at my age such ill-conditioned threats have small power to terrify.

"Why, yes; Toad, as he styles himself, is evidently aware of my small entry into his affairs. Indeed, I fancy he is under a name less ugly—among my personal acquaintances. There is nothing strange in that.

"Our giants of chemistry are not so many that one should escape me. It is possible that I have unwittingly revealed to the man himself the mission entrusted to me by the premier, to endeavor to discover the identity of this man—Toad."

"He threatens you, then?"

"He definitely gives me until midnight tonight to make an end of living. Although, to be sure, I had forgotten all about it until now. A crank, Framling, if there ever was one."

"The letter received by Mr. Hannaford late this afternoon threatened you in exactly similar terms," Framling said. "Nothing would satisfy him but that I should find you and take you to his office. Knowing your habit of walking near the pond at this hour, I came immediately in

search of you. The premier's impatience would not allow me even to find my hat. I have a taxi waiting on the avenue."

"What is the time?" Mr. Gregory asked.

The park policeman, Crampton, who was about to stroll on, turned his torch-light on the watch in Framling's hand.

"A quarter to eight."

"So late?" the old gentleman said with mild concern. "I am behind with my medicine, Framling. Crampton, would you have the goodness to give me a little more light? Thank you."

Framling said, plainly amused by this meticulous adherence to time-table treatment: "How has your heart been, Mr. Gregory? You still carry with you each exact dose in a phial, I see."

"Otherwise I am sure I should forget to take my medicine at all." Mr. Gregory smiled.

He raised the tiny glass bottle to his lips and swallowed the amber contents at a gulp.

ICANNOT—no, I simply cannot find words to describe the incredible sequel. It seemed to me that even with the act of swallowing, the old man—as if yielding to a sudden, swift, spontaneous combustion—burst into flame. A spurt of jade-green fire came from his mouth, lighting for one horrific second the enormous astonishment and fear that distended the pupils of his eyes.

His nostrils seemed to crackle. He fell gently forward, like a wax candle bending to the heat, with the ghastly flame sucked downward into his body, and toppled over on his face.

If the awfulness had stopped at that our sanity had been shocked enough. Yet we three, standing paralyzed, saw worse—infinitely, unbelievably worse.

For as he lay, there came again from every cell of flesh and blood and bone, little creeping tendrils of that jade-green flame, as if his body were soaked with fire—came and vanished. And there was no body....

There was nothing but a thin green mist that might have been smoke, but that was shining and heat-laden and evilly stinking, like a breath from Hell.

Crampton's voice said at my ear:

"Quick! Catch him before he falls over!"

Though I was half fainting myself, Framling's utter collapse came as a needed spur. Between us we got him to a grass border, where he lay quivering.

Crampton said, like a man distraught: "Great God! I must be mad. Nothing like that ever happened . . . ever could happen. . . ."

He left me at that and went away a little, and I seemed to hear him being violently ill. He was a big man, middle-aged and powerful, but when he returned he was sagging like jelly. He picked up his torch from the gravel path, where it had fallen in the stress of his emotion, and walked to where Mr. Gregory had been.

The green haze, or whatever it was, had gone. The gravel thereabouts—as I saw for myself next day—seemed slightly darker in shade than the rest; but that was all. There remained of Mr. Gregory nothing but the walking stick which he had rested against the seat when he stood up to drink.

My own sickness had passed. I carried water in my hat from a nearby tap, and with this aid quickly revived Framling. But for some seconds after he was conscious, his look was vacant.

He said presently, catching at his throat: "Crampton . . . Where's Crampton? Look here. Did that really happen to Mr. Gregory, or was it some shocking nightmare of illness?"

"It . . . happened, Mr. Framling," Crampton said.

Framling sat a moment with his face buried in his hands. I could hear the breath whistling in his lungs. But in a little while he became composed. He turned to me and asked: "What is your name?"

I told him.

"Well, Mr. Murchison," he said, "I needn't tell you, I suppose, how urgently necessary it is that not one word of this ghastly business should reach the public ear. It might do incalculable harm. I can rely on your word of honor?"

"Of course," I said. "What do you mean to do, Mr. Framling?"

For a moment or two he said nothing. He looked at Crampton, who was taking little short strides up and down the path, like a man bereft.

"I must see the premier. I shall probably be accused of insanity, or worse. After all, there's that possibility for all of us. We may be insane . . ."

I said: "No, Mr. Framling, we're not insane. What we saw was insane, but we three are sane enough."

"Well," said Framling, "this won't do. There's no telling how the premier will take this news. Look here, in case your added testimony is needed, what's your address?"

I told him quite frankly just how I stood.

He said: "You seem a good sort. And I'm awfully obliged for the way you've stood to Crampton and me. I can put you in the way of decent lodgings, I think. My wife has a girl friend who lets a few rooms by the way of keeping the wolf from the door. I happen to know that a room became vacant yesterday. If you'd like to try there . . ."

It sounded just what I wanted and I said so gratefully.

"I'll give you this little note, then," Framling said, scribbling a few lines on the back of an envelope. "Her name is Nancy Carlisle, and the address is Monray Street, East Melbourne.

"By the way, in case you're suited, I ought to tell you, perhaps, that her father is something of a crank. Mona—that's my wife—says it's a case of religious mania. But he's not objectionable, they say. Anyhow, you'll like Nancy. She's a first-rate girl.

"And mind—not a word to any one about poor old Gregory. Good Lord! I can't bring myself to believe what happened, even now."

Crampton came up then. He said: "I suppose you'll want me to go with you to the premier, Mr. Framling?"

"Yes," Framling said. "Murchison, we can give you a lift as far as the Treasury. Monray Street is not even five minutes from the government offices, as a matter of fact."

I said goodbye at the foot of the Treasury steps, and set out for Monray Street and Miss Nancy Carlisle. My head was in a whirl. It seemed to me that even now the real significance of everything had somehow escaped us, and that a vaster horror was to come.



Jade green fire lighted for one horrific second the
fear that distended the pupils of his eyes.

CHAPTER 2

The Curious Carlises

I FOUND the house without difficulty. It formed part of a stone terrace which had obviously fallen on evil times. The brick steps, up which one climbed to a narrow porch, were crumbling and moss-grown. An attenuated wooden veranda ran the length of the entire second story, after the manner of a long acrobatic earthworm.

Number 5 was exactly midway along the terrace. As I pushed open the creaking iron gate I saw that an attempt at a garden graced the meager frontage. There were a number of abbreviated kerosene tins containing geraniums, and a nasturtium grew at the foot of the steps. There was also a solitary rose bush at the center of a patch of grass.

Search discovered no bell of any kind, but an old-style knocker was on the door, and this I made use of to invoke from within a series of low hollow echoes. The last had barely died when the door opened to the light of a narrow hallway, with a staircase climbing at its end.

The walls were covered with a gloomy-tinted surface very shining and clean. In places, the plaster had broken away, and the paint-work was old and shabby.

These impressions were not all gained at the time; they came later in the evening, when I made a second entry with my suitcases from the railway cloakrooms. For the moment I was fully occupied in admiration of the girl confronting me.

Nancy Carlisle was then—as she confessed some weeks later—within a week of her twenty-fifth birthday. She was of medium height and inclining to plumpness. In the exact sense of the word she was not pretty; her features were too irregular, perhaps.

It was the animation in her face and the musical timbre of her voice that first captured my imagination. These imbued her with a charm far beyond the ordered sightlessness of mere good looks.

Her eyes were a mellow brown, very wide and frank. Her hair was brown and disposed about her shapely head in a windblown bob.

Having read Framling's introductory

scrawl, she gave me a very friendly smile.

"Yes, Mr. Murchison, the room is still vacant. I shall be glad to let you have it, if you find it suitable. I will show it to you."

It proved to be a large and airy room, with just the right amount of furniture—all spotlessly clean. There was one large window of the ordinary type, and a double-door window which gave access to the balcony. From this a fine view was had of the Fitzroy Gardens, now softly dotted with lights.

I said, "This is exactly what I hoped for, Miss Carlisle—if it is not too expensive."

"With breakfast, Mr. Murchison, I have been charging thirty shillings a week." Her tone was a little anxious, I thought, as if she feared I might think her grasping. "And of course you would have the use of the sitting room downstairs. Mr. Mertz was always comfortable here, I think."

I gathered that she referred to my predecessor. Certainly he had every opportunity of being comfortable, and I said so.

"That will suit me admirably, Miss Carlisle. Was Mr. Mertz with you any length of time?"

"Nearly three years," she said. She added impulsively: "And yet, do you know, I could hardly describe to you what he looked like. Isn't that curious? In all that time I don't believe I ever met him, as we say, face to face. I always placed his breakfast on a tray outside his door, and knocked and went away."

"He left the house very early each morning—even on Sundays—and usually returned late at night. He had no visitors, unless you might count Father as one. Father often came here to Mr. Mertz's room, and they would talk for hours. Father liked Mr. Mertz."

"But you did not?" I asked, at a venture, attracted by some queer quality in her look.

"No," she said frankly, "I did not. Indeed, I think I very much disliked him. And yet he never once openly offended me. I can hardly explain it. But I was glad when he left us. I haven't even bothered to find out where he went."

"But I think father knows. I think

father went to see Mr. Mertz tonight, in fact. After all, Mr. Murchison, why shouldn't he? He is a lonely man himself, and I am glad he has at least one person that he takes pleasure in."

I was shown the sitting room downstairs. It, too, was plainly but comfortably furnished. There was a piano in an alcove by the fireplace, and a large bookcase stood by one wall.

There was another boarder beside me, I learned. This was a Miss Mollie Hollidew, a young lady who graced the chorus in a musical comedy when opportunity came. For the time being she was one of the ensemble of *The Kewpie Girl* which was drawing crowded houses at the Theatre Royal.

"Mollie is quite a dear," Nancy Carlisle said, "except for what she calls her temperament, but what I call plain bad temper. It worries Cuthbert frightfully."

I said: "Who is Cuthbert?"

Nancy smiled.

"Cuthbert is—well, it is rather hard to describe Cuthbert. His other name, by the way, is Weinseidle. Cuthbert Weinseidle. It's an astonishing name, isn't it, Mr. Murchison? He's devoted to Mollie. He fetches her from the theater in his car regularly every night. It's really quite pathetic."

HE HAS no conversation; absolutely none. He just sits in front of Mollie, and stares at her mournfully. He reminds me sometimes of one of these china poodles. And he often irritates Mollie to the verge of madness."

"He wants her to marry him?"

"He proposes every night, I think."

Nancy burst into musical laughter. "Really it's too absurd. She won't say yes or no to the poor soul. She might do a great deal worse than Cuthbert. He has plenty of money— inherited, of course. And if he is not over-blessed with intelligence, he is a very good-hearted, decent boy. I like him."

When I returned from the railway cloakrooms with my suitcases, a handsome car was drawn up at the curb; and I judged that Mr. Cuthbert Weinseidle had performed his nightly task according to established custom, and was even then mournfully regarding the tired object of

his affections. Probably to no avail.

In witness whereof, Nancy Carlisle met me, as I entered the hall, with an invitation to join them in the sitting room.

"Father has gone to bed," she said, "but Mollie and Cuthbert are inside. You're just in time for some supper, Mr. Murchison."

Mollie Hollidew welcomed the introduction with a sleepy but entirely friendly smile. She was a solid-looking brunette with a shingled, glossy head, and a much-carmined complexion. Her manner was a little affected, but underneath it I seemed to sense a sound heart.

She said as we shook hands: "You'll excuse me not rising, Mr. Murchison, won't you? As I tell Nancy, art is so exacting. Of course, you've been to see *The Kewpie Girl*?"

"Mr. Murchison arrived from Sydney only today," Nancy explained. "Mr. Weinseidle . . . Mr. Murchison."

His hand lay in mine like a lifeless herring.

Mr. Weinseidle's eye, I thought, was a little glassy. It rested on me briefly, and returned to Miss Hollidew.

He said: "Undoubtedly."

There didn't seem to be much sense in this, but as I was to discover later, "undoubtedly" was one of Cuthbert's stock remarks. He only had two. The other was "sure." As Nancy had said, he had no conversation.

Miss Hollidew, I was now informed, had had a tiff with the stage manager. She alluded to him scornfully as "that little runt," and said it was no wonder that three wives had divorced him. The only thing she couldn't understand was how he had escaped being poisoned.

While she enlarged on her text I studied Cuthbert. He was plainly much younger than Miss Hollidew; somewhere, I thought, about twenty-five or twenty-six. He had a long face and a short upper lip; his hair was fair and highly polished, and he wore sideburns and a small mustache.

Upon the whole, he seemed a little improved upon his kind. And without doubt the effect upon him of Miss Hollidew's charm was tremendous. His gaze never swerved from her, even when she made excited reference to the fact that he had

made no attempt to destroy the stage manager in return for insulting a lady.

"Restraint is the wiser course," Nancy said tactfully. "The manager is probably still remembering Cuthbert's look of contempt. You did look at him, didn't you, Cuthbert?"

Cuthbert said: "Undoubtedly."

"There . . . you see, Mollie," Nancy said.

"Well, perhaps, after all, it was best," Miss Hollidew conceded, with a yawn. "What's the use of arguing with a beastly little germ like Swiggins, anyhow? Give me a cigarette."

I thought this a good time to depart. I had only just realized how appallingly tired I was. The long journey by train, coupled with the incredible events of the evening, had shaken my nerves badly. Thought of Mr. Gregory was like a great black cloud at the back of my mind. I was suddenly chilled and dispirited.

Very likely something of this showed in my face, for Nancy Carlisle said as I stood up: "You look weary, Mr. Murchison. It was selfish of me to keep you up like this. I do hope you will find your bed comfortable."

I liked the warm, anxious way she smiled at me. Framling had been right when he said that she was a fine girl. It was extraordinary how homelike and contented a feeling she had given me. I think at that moment, apart from the incubus of my thought of Mr. Gregory, I was happier than I had ever been in my life.

In parting from Cuthbert I said: "I hope we shall meet again soon, Mr. Weinseidle."

I expected him to say, "Undoubtedly." Instead, he said, "Sure." His eyes never left Miss Hollidew, but I knew somehow that this resorting to the other half of his vocabulary was intended to express gratitude and liking.

Sleep came tardily. I am, as a rule, a good sleeper, but the poison of my first experience of Toad ran riot in my mind. I tried to tell myself that the thing had never happened, that it was a figment of morbid imagination, but failed sensibly to do so.

In the end, I gathered my thoughts about Nancy Carlisle—something I was to do often, very often, in the days to

come. It was an anodyne which has never once failed me.

I BREAKFASTED in the sitting room about nine o'clock next morning. There was, so far, no appearance of Nancy's father, and Miss Hollidew was in the habit of keeping to her bed—unless she was rehearsing—until after midday, so that Nancy and I were the sole company during the meal.

When it was over I went out for a walk. I ought, I suppose, to have bent all my energies toward securing some manner of occupation, for it was plain that my small capital must soon be at an end.

But I was queerly disinclined. I idled in the gardens for the entire morning and did not return to Excelsior Terrace until after lunch time.

Someone was playing the piano in the sitting room: a hymn tune. And presently there came the sound of a man's voice singing in tones that were muffled harshly.

As I entered the hall the singing ceased, and the voice entered upon a kind of undertoned recitative, like a litany. The door of the sitting room was half open, prompting my curiosity. I was presently viewing the rounded shoulders of a man who knelt at the piano stool as if it were some sort of altar.

He was chanting monotonously, yet the words held the leaven of a strange fervor. I could make nothing of what he was saying. It sounded to me like a hodgepodge of Biblical quotations.

"For what saith the Scriptures . . . Behold, I am come to send fire on the earth . . . neither shall there be any more a flood to destroy the earth . . . water and fire . . . and the two shall be one, and one shall be made two . . . woe unto this wicked generation for the end of all things is at hand . . ."

My elbow was touched lightly. I turned, a little shame-faced, to see Nancy Carlisle at my side. It seemed to me that her brown eyes were full of tears.

But before either of us could speak the old man at the piano made an end of his mumbling and rose to his feet facing us. He was tall and thin, with a straggling gray beard, and eyes that burned somberly from the shadow of his prominent brows.

Nancy said: "Father, this is Mr.

Murchison. He has taken the room that Mr. Mertz used to have."

I doubt that the old man understood her. He lifted a thin hand to his forehead and said, in a high, shaking voice: "A new heaven and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness."

She went to him and slipped her hand quietly into the crook of his arm.

The soft appeal appeared to rouse his scattered wits. The fire left his eyes and his body ceased its trembling. Sanity returned to his voice.

"Yes, Nancy?"

"This is Mr. Murchison, father. He is taking Mr. Mertz's old room."

I said: "I am glad to meet you, Mr. Carlisle."

It was remarkable how changed he was in those few seconds. From a fierce-visaged lunatic he had become a timid, bewildered old man. He gave me his hand doubtfully.

"I trust you are comfortable with us, Mr. Murchison. Our ways are simple, but our friends find us sincere."

I said I was sure of that. The situation was not without pathos, and I was glad presently to escape to my own room. I found an old cane arm-chair on the balcony; sat down and lit my pipe; and fell to musing over the strange person I had just met.

It was later, of course, that I learned the history of Rufus Carlisle. He had been a prominent figure some years before in the commercial life of the city. He was an ardent church worker and among the foremost in charitable enterprise.

As very often happens, however, in men untried by any grave crisis until fairly late in life, his philosophy was without solid foundation when reverses attacked it.

Unlucky speculation was followed by the death of his wife; and the weakness latent in Rufus Carlisle suddenly manifested itself in a fierce insobriety. He became a notorious drunkard and a man about town. His business was neglected and eventually collapsed; and he himself emerged from delirium tremens to remain for some weeks an inmate of a mental hospital.

On his discharge a strange reaction took place. He forswore utterly those practices

which had reduced him to human wreckage, and entered a phase of religious mania. This was for the most part unobtrusive.

In general, the old man fell into a formula of daily existence which never varied in essentials. He rose from his bed punctually each day at ten o'clock, and at eleven o'clock began the conduct of an hour's devotional exercise in the sitting room. He then dined.

From two o'clock to five each afternoon, unless prevented by rough weather, he was to be found upon a certain seat in the Fitzroy Gardens, reading a much-thumbed Bible and meditating vacantly. At six o'clock he had his tea.

The evenings alone were free of settled conduct. Sometimes he retired early; more often he was absent until a late hour.

Nancy, I discovered, never questioned her father's actions. She gave him a solicitude which was more maternal than daughterly, attending to his wants as to those of a small, irresponsible boy. She saw that he was properly garbed before he left the house, and that in the right-hand pocket of his overcoat were always a shilling and a small paper bag containing tobacco and matches.

The old man accepted this regular attention mechanically. I think, indeed, he moved mostly in a world of his own, without proper consciousness of mundane existence.

For all that, I surprised now and then a furtive look in his eyes which suggested that his mind was not so wholly clouded, but held very definitely some purpose of this world.

CHAPTER 3

Who for Extinction?

I HAD finished my pipe and was considering what now to do, when a tap came at the door of my bedroom. Nancy Carlisle's voice called: "Are you there, Mr. Murchison? Here's a visitor for you."

It was George Framling. I don't know that I was surprised to see him, for all day the impression had been with me that there was much more to come of the tragic circumstances of Mr. Gregory's death.

In daylight Framling proved to be dark-complexioned and very good-looking. His eyes were alert and clever, and he had a firm mouth and chin. If he was worried at all he concealed the fact cleverly, for he stood smiling and joking very naturally until Nancy withdrew and we were left alone.

But I knew then that his jollity was assumed. His smile left him like the dropping of a mask, and his hands seemed unsteady as he lit a cigarette.

He said: "Can we be overheard here, Murchison?"

"I don't think so," I replied.

And then, I suppose, the terrific occasion of our last meeting returned with a rush, for I heard myself stammering: "Good Lord! Then it was true! Do you know, I had half a belief until now that I had just dreamed the whole beastly thing."

"It's no dream," Framling said shortly. "In fact, Murchison, no nightmare could approach the reality. I came to take you to the Treasury buildings. Mr. Hannaford and one or two others are waiting for us."

"Mr. Hannaford?"

"The premier. This thing is horribly serious, Murchison. I've never seen him so grave. I don't know whether he guesses what lies behind it all, but I do know that for the time being he is putting aside all considerations of an ordinary nature. By the way, you've kept your own counsel?"

"Yes," I said.

"Continue to do so," Framling said simply. "Now, if you'll get your hat . . ."

Five men awaited us in the premier's room in the State Government offices. First, Mr. Morgan Hannaford himself—short and stout, with close-cropped gray hair and mustache, rather plethoric cheeks falling to a stern, square jaw, and somber gray eyes.

When we entered he was seated at a table, talking earnestly to a thin, angular man with keen, clever features, who was presently made known to me as Professor Branden, of the Faculty of Chemical Science at the Melbourne University.

Close by stood a middle-aged, powerfully built man, with a large nose and mouth and an almost bald head. This was Sir Hector Corrilees, chief commissioner

of police, really a very remarkable man.

The fourth man I immediately recognized as Senior-Detective Ralph Hermann. Hermann's rugged, farmer-like face had of late figured frequently in the photographic columns of the daily press. He held a remarkably able record in the annals of crime detection, and had only then barely concluded a particularly brilliant coup. He was high in the confidence of his chiefs and was understood to possess initiative and determination.

I saw him now as a thickset man of average height, slow moving and slow speaking. His eyes were mild, but a fearless confidence seemed to inspire his every word.

The remaining man was Crampton, the park policeman.

"Your name, I understand, is Murchison?" Mr. Hannaford said, as I came forward.

"Maurice Murchison," I told them. "I arrived from Sydney yesterday."

"Will you kindly tell us, Mr. Murchison, what you know of last night's extraordinary happening?"

I did so briefly. It was evident when I had concluded that their gravity deepened. Until that moment I really think they had cherished an improbable hope that Framling and the park policeman were victims of an extensive delusion. My corroborating testimony left them utterly at a loss.

The premier frowned and looked at Professor Branden.

"Have you any theory, Professor? Does science know of a chemical capable of such a shockingly complete annihilative action?"

"To my knowledge it does not," Branden said, emphatically. His eyes were frankly bewildered. "Here is something which appears to have ignited, as it were, the entire juices of the body. I can describe it in no other way. And artificially induced an instantaneous bodily combustion . . . Mr. Hannaford, sanity finds no answer."

Detective Hermann asked abruptly: "A green flame, you said, Mr. Murchison? What kind of a green flame?"

"I don't know," I replied. "Just an ordinary green flame."

"It seems to me," Framling interposed, "that the green was edged with orange."

"It scarcely matters," the premier said. "Mr. Murchison, I need scarcely ask if you realize the profound significance of what has happened and the vital necessity for secrecy. You can imagine the public alarm were the facts known at large. The facts must not be known. You will give me your word of honor, I hope, that so far as you are concerned no word of it passes your lips outside the present company."

"You have it," I promised. "I should like to know, however, how you propose to conceal the fact of Mr. Gregory's disappearance."

Mr. Hannaford smiled grimly.

WE DON'T propose to conceal it. Mr. Gregory was known to be suffering from an affected heart. Under the circumstances, his sudden death will occasion no surprise. The press has been notified already; and this evening you will read that at a late hour last night Mr. Gregory collapsed in his rooms and died at once. His funeral will take place tomorrow morning."

"His funeral!" I could not avoid exclaiming.

Sir Hector Corrilees said, apparently impatient at my dullness: "Exactly, Mr. Murchison. When a man dies he is usually provided with a funeral, is he not? In this case the public will be none the worse off for showing reverence for an empty coffin. Better that than the truth."

"The truth," the premier said, "remains with ourselves alone. Now, Mr. Murchison, one other thing. Framling tells me that you are at present without employment. I propose, with your consent, to appoint you as assistant to Framling. You will be paid a salary and will be, to all intents and purposes, a clerk in my department.

"Actually, your duties will be to act, as you may be directed, toward an elucidation now to be undertaken by us seven men of the mystery surrounding the death of Mr. Gregory. Are you agreeable?"

It was a subtle command rather than a request, and as such I recognized it. In any case, I was willing enough. Here was work to my hand, and of a caliber to excite my utmost interest.

"I am quite willing," I assured him.

"The rest of us are sworn to secrecy," the premier continued gravely, "and you will be good enough, Mr. Murchison, to take the oath in turn, and put your signature to this declaration. Possibly this procedure strikes you as extraordinary. I may go so far, indeed, as to say that not only are the circumstances themselves extraordinary; they mark a crisis of unexampled danger."

When I had taken the oath the tension seemed to relax a little.

"And now, Mr. Murchison," Mr. Hannaford said, "it is necessary you should know something of what we fear. The crime of which you were a witness last night is undoubtedly that of a man who styles himself Toad.

Toad is, I should say, a criminal lunatic with the brain of a genius. His identity is wholly unknown to us, although Professor Branden has fortunately been able to provide us with a tiny clue. He has recalled that some years ago, when he was a student, a classmate at the chemistry sessions bore the nickname of Toad. I understand, Professor, that you have been unable to trace this man's proper name?"

"Unfortunately, that is so," Professor Branden said. "The time which has elapsed—it must be, I suppose, close on thirty years—has dimmed everything. I can only recollect that he was a man of very repulsive features, but exceedingly clever, and with almost a mania for research work."

"Poor Gregory was also in my year, and it was he who revived my impressions of the fellow only yesterday. He was called Toad, I believe, because someone had noticed that the iris of his eyes was of a peculiar reddish hue. The toad, as perhaps you are aware, Mr. Murchison, has a flame-colored iris."

"Toad had also a face which, as I remember it, was globular and puffy—another characteristic of the reptile whose name he vaingloriously affected. I say 'vaingloriously' because he was a man of enormous vanity. So far from being resentful of the ugly appellation, he took it as a compliment."

"Apart from this fact of his appearance, he was of a spiteful, poisonous disposition, If Toad of our present problem, Mr.

Hannaford, is Toad as known to Gregory and me, we are confronted with a man who is both wicked and clever to a degree."

Framling said in a low voice: "Mr. Gregory spoke of him as a giant of chemistry. You remember that, perhaps, Murchison?"

"Yes," I said. "I had an impression that Mr. Gregory was pretty close to knowing who he was."

"I believe that," Professor Branden said. His manner for a second or two was agitated. "It was that knowledge—or, I should say, impending knowledge—which destroyed him. By some means this man knew of it. It became imperative, apparently, that Gregory should be silenced.

"That, of course, is a danger which now confronts every one of us in this room. I scarcely think, however, that similar means will be employed. Chance probably aided in Gregory's case. And there would always be the risk that the chemical employed—if it is a chemical—might be discovered and its foul nature revealed."

Sir Hector Corrilees looked at his fuming cigar. He said: "What steps do you advise, Hermann?"

"The identity of Toad is my first concern," the detective said slowly. "There are two lines of approach. First, what Professor Branden has told us; second, the man's handwriting, assuming that it is his handwriting. Framling, you might let Mr. Murchison see those communications. The beginning of the story lies there."

"And you, Branden?"

"For my part," the professor said, as Framling handed to me a little sheaf of papers, "I have taken a sample of the gravel where poor Gregory fell. I intend to subject it to an exhaustive analysis."

I GAVE my attention, then, to Framling and the letters. There were six of these, the first being dated some four months back. All were in a crabbed handwriting very difficult to decipher, but the envelopes in each case were neatly typed and addressed uniformly:

THE STATE PREMIER,
TREASURY BUILDINGS,
MELBOURNE.

Framling said: "The writing is atrocious, isn't it? You will note that each letter bears a separate county district postmark. An ordinary precaution, of course, on the part of the writer."

The first letter was as follows:

The Premier, Mr. Morgan Hannaford . . . I require the sum of £100,000, failing which I shall make myself unpleasantly known to the Government and country. Reply in the Missing Friends columns of the Daily Press .

Toad.

"A touch of satire there," Framling murmured at my elbow. "We took no notice, naturally. Those in office are inundated with crank communications. A fortnight later this one arrived."

The second was couched more peremptorily:

I now require £200,000. Delay Mr. Hannaford, will prove costly. See to it.

Toad.

There were two more letters in similar vein. Then came this:

My patience is not inexhaustible. I am fully able to enforce my demands by means of which you little dream. My terms are now £500,000, and unless reply is forthcoming within one week I shall endeavor to prove to you my entire seriousness.

Toad.

"In the meantime," Framling explained, "we had taken steps to identify the writer, if possible. Mr. Gregory had chanced to call on the premier early in the series, and was shown the letters—more by way of a joke than anything else. He was, however, impressed by the signature.

"At his own suggestion, Mr. Gregory undertook to make inquiries. Still later, Mr. Hannaford, persuaded now that the affair was not altogether a joking matter, arranged that Hermann should take it up. The week ended the day before yesterday. Yesterday afternoon this letter came."

As I read, an ugliness seemed to leer at me from every line of the crooked writing.

On my own head be it, then, Mr. Hannaford, or rather, on the head of Mr. Stephen Gregory, whose unwarranted interference in my affairs has annoyed me for some time past. I now demand £800,000.

Toad.

"It was this letter," Framling explained, "which sent me in search of Mr. Gregory last night. Can anyone doubt the connection?"

As if in sinister reply, a knock came at the door. Framling opened it to take from a messenger a telegram addressed to Mr. Hannaford. The premier opened the envelope casually, continuing his conversation with Sir Hector Corrilees and Professor Branden.

But as his eye fell on the contents I saw his face blanch, he let the telegraph form fall from his fingers to the floor.

Professor Branden said, as he recovered the telegram: "Not bad news, I trust, Mr. Hannaford."

The premier seemed to recover his grip on himself. He gave a short laugh, and said: "Read it out, Branden, and judge for yourselves."

Branden did so, a hardness creeping into his tones as he grasped its damnable import.

GREGORY GONE. WHO NEXT? THINK IT OVER. TOAD.

The silence was broken by a savage exclamation from the chief commissioner. He stood up and threw his cigar butt into the chimney grate as if he might have been hurling a bomb into the face of our common enemy, then said, harshly:

"Hermann, it's up to you. I give you carte blanche. Do exactly as you like so long as you lay this swine by the heels. Alive or dead, Hermann. Nobody will bother you with a single question."

"I'll do my best, Sir Hector," the detective said, very quietly.

A little later we quietly went our ways—to meet again as individual mourners

at the mock funeral next morning of Stephen Gregory. It was curious to observe the all-unconscious solemnity of the great crowd which assembled at the graveside, and to reflect upon the astonishment and indignation which might have resulted were it known that the beautiful fostering hope of the burial service was being evoked for nothing more than a coffin full of carefully packed bricks.

I saw Detective Hermann standing on the outskirts of the assemblage, a frown on his farmer's face. When the service was over, he approached me unobtrusively and suggested that we lunch in company.

I was quite agreeable to this, for I wanted to know him more intimately. He had, as I found, an engaging personality when he chose. We chatted of many things, but of Toad there was—as if by tacit understanding—no mention. Our surroundings, indeed, precluded an exchange of confidences. He spent the afternoon going through the class files at the University, in the hope of narrowing down the identity of Toad.

CHAPTER 4

Prepare for Perdition!

NEXT day I began duty supposedly as assistant to Framling, in the premier's department. In reality I had something to do with routine affairs of state. My instructions were to keep strict watch upon strangers entering the Treasury buildings.

I was asked privately by Sir Hector Corrilees to be particularly watchful over the premier while he was on the premises. The chief commissioner did not say outright that he feared an attempt to harm Mr. Hannaford, but the fact was fairly evident.

In addition to me three plainclothes policemen were stationed in and about the premier's section of the building. The premier's messenger held strict orders to admit no one to Mr. Hannaford's room who had not first been approved either by Framling or by me.

A whole fortnight went by without incident of any kind. Toad had apparently withdrawn into his hole, for there was neither sight nor sign of him. Since the

sneering telegram received by the premier, even the mails had been silent.

Framling and I began to breathe more freely. We told each other that Toad was the usual kind of crank, after all; that, as his kind almost invariably did, he had gone off on some other *ignis fatuus* of his disordered imagination, and must already have forgotten us.

Not that we really believed this. At the back of our minds remained ever the abominable taint of poor Gregory's death.

The reason for this respite has never been made plain. The premier and Sir Hector Corrilees later subscribed to the belief that Toad had fallen ill. Hermann, on the other hand, was of the opinion that the silence was a deliberate attempt to infect our resolution further, this time with the bacillus of indecision.

I incline to this myself. Indecision, waiting for the unknown to happen, is notoriously demoralizing in its effect. This would have been a metaphysical move quite in keeping with what I know of Toad's mental strategy.

During this fortnight I found unhindered opportunity to establish myself in Nancy's good graces. From the first the attraction had been mutual, and I was now finding friendship too barren a name for the feeling she inspired in me.

I had good sense enough, however, to progress slowly. Even had Nancy then returned my love, I had nothing to offer her in the way of worldly possessions. I had yet to make any real progress toward success, and it was important to me that I gain some standing before offering marriage.

But there was a second, more ominous consideration.

Nancy was becoming more and more anxious about her father. The course of Rufus Carlisle's aberration no longer ran smoothly, but showed a new and alarming impetus. Whereas formerly his outbursts of prophetic declamation had come at stated times, he now went into them irregularly and without warning. His manner grew painfully excited, and there were times when he frankly raved.

Rufus Carlisle had become a stranger to the sublimely comforting assurance of religion. The man was obsessed by the thought of the world's impending doom.

He gloried in it with the fierce joy of the fanatic. He was the keeper and dispenser of the secret councils of wrath incarnate, and the envisaging of death and destruction roused him to overpowering madness.

My first indication of the old man's increasing disorder came on Saturday, shortly before midnight. I was talking with Cuthbert and Mollie Hollidew, who had shortly before returned from the theater, while Nancy had gone to the kitchen to prepare supper.

Rufus Carlisle had been absent since early in the afternoon, and Nancy was more than a little anxious about him. To pacify her I had promised that if he had not returned by twelve o'clock I would borrow Cuthbert and his car, and go quietly in search of him. I had a feeling, however, that he would appear safely before that hour. And so, indeed, it proved.

Mollie Hollidew, I remember, was in a bad temper. The company had opened that night in a new show with the engaging title of *Step On It, Maudie*, and a new leading lady billed as Nonie Mayhew. Certain flowers and chocolates, which Miss Hollidew thought destined for herself, had gone instead to the leading lady.

SHE said: "I bet you couldn't find a less greedy girl than me anywhere in the world, Mr. Murchison; but, as I told Cuthbert, coming home, I'm not altogether blind and dumb. Did I, or did I not, see that man smiling at me and shouting encore?"

Cuthbert said, supremely distraught: "Undoubtedly . . . sure, Mollie . . . undoubtedly . . ."

At which Mollie began to sniff into an absurd handkerchief.

It was at this unpropitious moment that Rufus Carlisle entered. Invariably on his return he went straight up the stairs to his bedroom. Tonight saw a drastic alteration.

I think he was quite oblivious of our presence in the sitting room. For a second, as he stumbled toward the piano, I caught his look; but there was no recognition in it. His mind was turned inward upon itself in a kind of visionary ecstasy.

He fell on his knees by the piano stool, and his thin voice rose in a flood of disjointed words.

"Behold, the end of all things is at hand . . . With mine own eyes have I seen the flame . . . For the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up . . ."

The trembling voice went on and on:

"Because of their wickedness men shall cease . . . As it was in the days of Noah . . ."

Madness, without doubt; and yet I could not escape a kind of superstitious awe. I had, too, a sense of intrusion. It did not seem quite decent, somehow, to be listening to this intimate craziness of a human soul.

I was on the point of going for Nancy, when she came quietly into the room. It made my heart ache to see how wan she looked. She laid her hand gently on the shaking shoulders.

"Daddy . . . come, dear, you're so tired. You must get to bed. I've saved such a nice supper . . ."

If he heard he took no notice.

"For the two shall be one, and the one two. Fire shall be water, and water fire. There shall be perdition of unrighteous men, and they that mock shall be reserved unto fire against the great day of judgment . . ."

Nancy said, a catch in her voice:

"Daddy . . . See, it's bedtime. You're so tired . . ."

She tugged at his arm, and of a sudden the reedy voice wavered and was still. Rufus Carlisle rose unsteadily to his feet, staring at us with bent brows.

"Your supper is all ready, Father."

"Even these shall know perdition," old Carlisle mumbled, pointing at us with a skeleton hand. "Even these, your friends, Nancy, for they know not righteousness, neither have they been purged by flames."

Nancy said: "Yes, dear. You must tell them tomorrow, for now you're so tired."

He allowed her to lead him away then. He walked like a man asleep, leaning heavily on her slightness.

"Purged by flames, indeed!" Miss Hollidew exclaimed. "He wants purging with a straitjacket. I call it downright insulting. Considering the company he keeps, I'd like to know who he thinks he is, wanting to burn up his betters . . . I would so. Eh, Cuthbert?"

Thus imperishably the King's English, as from the scornful lips of Miss Hollidew. Cuthbert said: "Undoubtedly."

I said: "What do you mean—the company he keeps?"

Mollie nodded wisely.

"I saw him coming out of a joint the other day, chin and nose, as they say, with a Chinaman. At least, if it wasn't a Chinaman it was so near to it you couldn't have told the difference. Hobnobbing away in great style. Now, I ask you Mr. Murchison—ain't there plenty of his own kind to talk to, when he feels chatty?"

The news was disturbing. And yet there was more than one Chinese in Melbourne.

CHAPTER 5

Madman's Mind

EARLY in the afternoon, on Wednesday of Toad's third week of silence, I stood for a half hour or so, talking to the little knot of police who were stolidly watching a number of unemployed staging a demonstration in front of the Treasury buildings.

These unfortunates, foiled in an attempt to interview the premier, resolved themselves into a meeting of protest. One of their number climbed upon a lamp post and from this vantage point treated his fellows to a violent harangue. At length, glancing defiantly toward us, he added a kind of benediction—or malediction:

"Revolution, says you. Worse'n that by a long chalk, I'm telling you, if things ain't altered. I know what I know. I've heard of a bloke that reckons he's got hold of something that'll knock the guv-ment rotten . . . aye, and the whole darned country beside, if they ain't careful. I don't know what it is, but I'm just telling you."

It was sheer absurdity to connect this rambling utterance with the horrific machinations of the creature with whom our little band was contending. And yet I found myself doing so. I was soaked through and through with the poison of Toad.

The seven sworn to find an antidote for that poison met in the premier's room at eight o'clock in the evening. The blinds were tightly drawn, and a plainclothes man was on guard outside the door. Mr.

Hannaford, whose manner betrayed the nervous strain which he was undergoing, briefly reviewed facts as we then knew them.

He added: "No further communication has been received by me. Professor Branden, have you discovered the nature of the liquid used to destroy Mr. Gregory, or the means by which it was substituted for his ordinary medicine?"

From this point onward Framling and I took turns in recording what was said.

"As regards the liquid," Branden said slowly, "I have discovered nothing. It is evidently an evaporative, since no trace of it was found in analysis of the gravel where Mr. Gregory was annihilated. The nature of it is utterly beyond me to determine. Science has no answer for the astounding facts. They are apparently not to be explained by any known formulae; being, in fact, totally opposed to the science of chemistry."

He cleared his throat, adjusted his pince-nez with a slightly trembling hand, and resumed: "I think, however, I can account for the substitution . . . if it was a substitution and not merely an introduction. Gregory compounded his own medicines. He had, as perhaps you know, a slight dropsy of the heart and regularly took small portions of rosemary wine.

"He was pronouncedly in favor of herbal remedies, and obtained supplies of the herbs he required from a Chinese herbalist of good repute. I have satisfied myself that this man is beyond suspicion.

"In addition to the rosemary wine, Gregory prepared a very concentrated tincture of certain herbs. It was his custom to prepare a number of doses and keep these in tiny bottles in readiness for taking. When going out he slipped one of these bottles into his waistcoat pocket. When a dose became due he simply emptied the contents of the bottle at a gulp.

"As you also know, Mr. Hannaford, Gregory lived alone in city lodgings. He was without relatives . . . a fact which was of enormous help to us in keeping the circumstances of his death secret. I interviewed the landlady last week and elicited some interesting but useless details of his private life.

"One particular, however, is worth mentioning. On the morning of Gregory's

death, while he was absent, a Chinese came to the house. He informed Mrs. Brent, the landlady, that he came with a fresh supply of herbs for Gregory, and asked permission to place these in Gregory's bedroom. He gave as excuse for his personal attention an alleged need that certain of the herbs must be disposed in a certain manner, otherwise their virtue became impaired."

Professor Branden shrugged.

"Now . . . you see how easily substitution could have been effected. Gregory's habit of taking his medicine from small phials taken from his waistcoat pocket was widely known. Indeed, it was somewhat of a joke in luncheon circles in the city, for more than once he had been known to interrupt himself in an after-dinner speech to swallow his prescribed dose at the prescribed hour.

"To my mind, gentlemen, the fact that he was late in taking his medicine on the evening of the tragedy shows that he was unduly abstracted. He had, I believe, definitely identified Toad. Had he lived another hour, perhaps, that information would now be in our possession. It was fated that he was to die before he could reveal it.

"To return . . . Observe, then, how easy it would have been for Gregory's caller to take from his dressing table the first in order of the little row of phials that were always there in readiness—in the sequence of their freshness—and replace it with an identical phial containing—whatever it was. Gregory returns and had his lunch. He then places in his pocket the phial containing his evening dose, and again leaves the house. The rest we know."

The detective began with the statement that he had narrowed the University class lists down to some thirty-five names.

"This is going to be a longer task than I thought. Only the necessity for secrecy holds me to it personally. Apart from this, I have nothing to report."

"In all this," Mr. Hannaford said, when Hermann had fallen silent, "Chinese figure. Is Toad, then, a Chinese? If so, it appears to dispose of Professor Branden's theory that he is identical with the man so nicknamed in his chemistry classes."

The detective said: "Not necessarily,

I think. Let us say, for example, that Toad assumes the disguise in order to impose upon Gregory's landlady and effect the desired substitution."

The professor was still mentally engaged upon the problem of the amber-colored fluid, I knew; for he had been muttering disjointedly to himself for some time.

Here and there I caught a word—I am bound to say without making much sense of them. He appeared to be of an exhaustive turn of mind.

He muttered now, staring at the wall: "Radioactivity . . . little traces of tangibility . . . chemical reactions . . . transmutation of primary elements . . ."

He seemed to linger on the last, whatever it might mean, for he repeated it several times.

"Well, gentlemen, what now?" the premier said wearily. "We must, I suppose, concentrate upon discovering this pseudo-Chinese? Should that be very difficult?"

"I would rather," Professor Branden said, rousing himself, "discover Toad's laboratory. There lies our real danger. The man himself is powerless without the means to harm. We must discover and destroy this poison at its source."

We parted at that.

On reaching home I found Nancy rather upset; and with small wonder. I have persuaded her to set down herself the events of that evening, which occurred in my absence. To my mind they have a distinct bearing on the whole story of Toad.

Nancy's statement follows:

CHAPTER 6

Pursuit of Mertz

MAURICE has asked me to record what little I know of Mr. Mertz, and to explain, if I can, something of the relations which existed between Mr. Mertz and my poor father.

I think whatever influence Mr. Mertz had was evil. This is pure assumption on my part, for I have nothing really tangible to offer in proof. Say, if you like, that my woman's intuition upholds the belief.

Instinct warned me from the very beginning that Mr. Mertz was undesirable. I remember the day—some three years be-

fore Maurice came—when I answered a knock on the door, and opened it to see Mr. Mertz on the step.

He wore an overcoat, with the collar turned up around his neck, and a felt hat that was pulled well down over his forehead. I saw nothing of his face but the thick-lensed spectacles which he always affected. The lenses of these were very large and round, and gave him a queer, owlish appearance. He was short and squat in build, and his voice was soft . . .

This is my only impression of Mr. Mertz. I never once saw him without his overcoat and hat. During the three years that he boarded with us he never once, to my knowledge, entered the sitting room. He left the house early, after taking breakfast in his bedroom, and returned invariably late at night.

He never spoke to me, unless I first spoke to him; and then but briefly. His behavior was faultless. He paid his board faithfully each week.

And yet I detested him. He seemed to carry with him a kind of sinister atmosphere. I was always expecting some horrible revelation—of what, I cannot even now conceive. A sort of repressed wickedness, perhaps. But no revelation came. The man went his own way, whatever it was, and kept his own counsel. If he had a secret vice he kept it well hidden.

For the first two years he came and went in this manner, without seeming to notice Father or me, except indirectly. Father was only at the beginning of his illness, then. He was very quiet and self-effacing. But his poor old head was growing steadily worse all the time.

It was pitiful to watch. I just made up my mind to humor him. It was doing nobody any harm if he liked to conduct a little service all to himself, kneeling at the piano stool in the sitting room, and afterward playing and singing hymns. It brought comfort to him.

One morning Mr. Mertz unexpectedly returned to the home—I suppose, for something he had forgotten. Father was right in the middle of his devotions, and I was dusting the bannisters 'on the first landing of the stairs.

I don't think Mr. Mertz saw me—in fact, I know he did not. The sitting room door was open, and I saw him stand there

looking in at Father in exactly the same half-amused, half-curious way that Maurice was to emulate later. He stood for quite five minutes . . .

And I stood, too, watching him in turn. I wanted to say that I considered his action prying and impertinent, but somehow the words wouldn't come. I seemed to understand that some extraordinary train of thought had seized him, and that his mood would not brook interference. I was, in a way, frightened.

While I was trying to reassure myself, Father made an end of his prayers. Mr. Mertz called in a soft voice: "Why, Mr. Carlisle, so you're an Adventist, are you?"

Father mumbled something in reply, but I could not distinguish what he said. At that moment I was prompted to draw back from the bannisters into the shadow of the landing. I had scarcely done so when Mr. Mertz turned and looked deliberately up and down, as if to make sure he was unobserved.

Apparently he was satisfied that I was nowhere about, for he turned once more to Father, who had come out into the vestibule. They talked for a little time, very softly and almost secretly, I thought. I could only catch an odd word here and there.

Presently Mr. Mertz turned again toward the foot of the stairs. He said quite plainly now: "Come and talk in my room this evening, Mr. Carlisle. I wish I'd known of this before."

Father replied: "I will . . . I will."

He was very excited and his voice shook.

I didn't wait any longer, for Mr. Mertz was coming up the stairs. I crept softly ahead and went into my own room and shut the door very gently. I heard him pass. A few moments later, he came back and down the stairs, and I heard the front door close after him.

I came out then. Father was still standing in the vestibule. I spoke to him, but his poor mind was clouded again. He just looked at me in his vague, gentle way without answering. I made him lie down for a while, and I think he slept. After he had had his lunch he went out, as usual, to sit and read in the gardens.

I hadn't the heart to worry him with questions. I couldn't see that it mattered

very much, one way or the other, if he became friendly with Mr. Mertz.

Father spent several hours that night in Mr. Mertz's room. It became a regular proceeding, after a while, that they should sit and talk into the small hours.

Father never referred to these talks with Mr. Mertz. I began to notice a change in his manner, however. He became more—what is the word? More militant. That's it: more militant.

FOR a long time past he had been wrapped up in prophecy and all that kind of thing. He was always expecting and praying for the end of the world to come. But hitherto it had been in a mild, rambling manner, as a child looks forward to a picnic or a treat of some kind.

The talks with Mr. Mertz—at least, I suppose it was that—changed all this. He began to declaim and denounce and threaten. The world was a sink of iniquity, and the sooner it was destroyed the better. He was dreadfully worked up about it all at times.

I was terrified that someone unsympathetic would overhear him and call in the authorities. I couldn't bear the thought that he would be taken away from me and shut up.

And then one day Mr. Mertz left us. He gave me no reason for doing so. He merely said that he was going elsewhere, and I was glad to be quit of him, but a little worried lest Father should miss the strange companionship.

As it happened, Father did not seem to mind in the least. I soon found out that he was visiting Mr. Mertz in his new home. Father gave me the impression that he and Mr. Mertz shared some tremendous secret. His poor, dear eyes sparkled and glowed, and he began to look almost happy.

Once I asked him whether he knew where Mr. Mertz had gone, and whether he ever saw him now. He looked at me very cunningly and shook his head. But I knew he was deceiving me. Someone—I think it was Cuthbert Weinseidle—had seen him talking to Mr. Mertz in the city . . .

I come now to the evening when Maurice was engaged at the premier's office. Mollie had left for the theater with Cuth-

bert; father and I had not been alone long when the knocker banged at the street door. I opened it and saw Mr. Mertz.

He said, in his soft voice: "Good evening, Miss Carlisle. I promised your father, you know, that I would look in on him now and then. In fact, if he's at home, a walk might brighten him up. You might tell him I'm here."

I would have told him that Father was not at home, but it would have been useless. Father was at my elbow. He was trembling as if with a sudden new excitement. He said, in the high, thin voice which so distressed me: "Behold! The hour draweth near when all the . . ."

Mr. Mertz interrupted—hastily and sharply, I thought.

He said: "I've come to take you for a walk and a talk, Carlisle. That is, if Miss Nancy doesn't object?"

There was polite question in his voice, but his eyes behind their covering glasses were commanding. I felt a little shiver run down my spine.

I said nothing, but helped Father on with his hat and overcoat. Mr. Mertz seemed to be smiling in the shadow of his hat as he took Father by the arm.

The door had scarcely closed upon them when I was racing upstairs to my room, in the sudden determination to follow them.

I cannot say what prompted me to do this. I think, perhaps, my patience was at an end. I thought that if I could learn something to Mr. Mertz's discredit I might use it as a threat to leave Father alone.

For by this time I was definitely assured that the association was in some way harmful to Father. I asked myself why Mr. Mertz should bother with Father at all, unless he had some ulterior motive. His interest dated from the time he had discovered Father's religious obsession, and he had been extraordinarily attentive since then.

Yet I could not for the life of me understand what it all meant.

I left the light burning in the vestibule. The house would be quite safe, and Maurice had his own key.

Fortunately, Father was a slow walker. I soon picked them up and followed some fifty yards behind. At Bourke Street Mr.

Mertz helped Father into a street car. I was too late to catch it, but a second car for the same destination came up almost immediately. I stood on the platform outside, keeping a sharp lookout for Mr. Mertz and Father when they alighted. The roadway was fairly empty and we had caught up to the car ahead and were following only a few feet in the rear.

In such manner I came presently into North Carlton. The conductor of my car asked me now where I proposed to get off. At a venture I said I was traveling to the terminus. I was told that we were then approaching it.

The conductor was young and quite evidently impressed by his own looks. I discovered that I was being invited to join in the impression. I am afraid I dispelled this hope rather rudely.

I was most concerned, not by his following crude pique, but by the fact that he obscured my view of people alighting from the car ahead. When finally he went grumbling about his business, I caught an instant's impression, as my car gathered way, of Mr. Mertz and Father walking toward a side street.

I rang the bell at once, but the car did not stop. The young conductor—glad, I suppose, to vent his ill humor—merely grinned at my frantic signals. I could have cried with vexation when the car deliberately ran past the next stopping place.

It became evident that I was being punished for ignoring the pimpled Adonis. My anger was so great that I would not yield him the satisfaction of admitting defeat. I waited until the car momentarily slowed, as it does to the panting of the great, tired cable, and stepped off, with a prayer in my heart.

I can still see the look of sour astonishment on the face of the conductor when I alighted without a mishap. Ignoring his shout of warning—I suppose he was frightened that his bad manners might have got him into serious trouble—I set off at a run along the block and a half dividing me from the lane where I had last seen Mr. Mertz and Father.

I found it presently at least, it seemed to be the place. A high tin fence ran on either side and beyond were crazy, ill-favored buildings of the kind Maurice and I had once seen in Padderman's Lane.

Where were they? I did not know what to do. Father might have been anywhere in the jumbled, vile-smelling darkness.

I looked at the houses on either side of the lane. They were both of brick and two-story. Those along the lane were, as far as I could see, just tumble-down cottages.

I thought I must have been mistaken in thinking I saw them turn into the lane itself. The eyes play curious tricks by lamplight. It was, I thought, more likely that they had gone into one of the better class of houses on the main street.

My blood was up now, and I was resolved, if I could, to discover Father and assert my authority. I would take him home at once, Mr. Mertz or no Mr. Mertz. And I would tell Mr. Mertz in plain language that he must in the future leave Father alone. Father was not like other men. I had been careless of the fact. I would be careless no longer. But looking at the long ramble of houses I knew it would be almost impossible to find Father. I had missed my chance. I had been back for an hour or so when Maurice came in, and I told him what had happened.

CHAPTER 7

Shadow of Terror

WHEN Nancy had finished her story I tried to comfort her, for she was frightful worried about her father. Then, all my good advice deserted me. I forgot everything except that I loved her.

I just took her in my arms forthwith . . . And there we were, holding to each other, and saying all those dear, quaint, foolish things that lovers manage to say. But this is not the story of my courtship.

It was late that night when old Rufus Carlisle returned. He seemed very tired and wan, I thought, and stared at us with even more abstraction than usual.

Nancy and I had agreed that it would be best not to question him. And so Nancy gave the old man his supper and saw him quietly to bed, as usual, without comment of any kind.

The next day passed without incident. On Saturday afternoon Nancy and I went to see George Framling and his wife. The

fact of our engagement was so self-evident that we could not have denied it, even if we had wanted to.

Immediately it was definitely thus established, Mona Framling—as women will—invigled Nancy apart for, I suppose, an exchange of confidences and a comparison of methods of manly proposal. I was much too happy to care. Framling and I were left to ourselves.

Framling said: "Well, Murchison, I must say you're a fast worker. I congratulate you. Next to my wife there isn't a girl I respect and admire more than Nancy Carlisle."

We chatted for some time, and then Framling was seized with an idea.

He said: "Look here, I've got a notion to run into town to the gardens and hunt up Crampton, and the three of us talk things over. You'll be staying to tea with us, and the girls are quite comfortable together. We can spend an hour or so on Toad's trail."

I thought it a good idea. So, shortly after, we found ourselves in the Alexandra Gardens looking for Crampton. We found him without difficulty, and presently we were seated on the very bench where Framling and I had sat on the eve of Mr. Gregory's death.

It was a beautiful afternoon, and it was difficult to realize that such charm as surrounded us was associated with so shocking a tragedy.

Framling asked: "Well, Crampton, have you had any luck at all in solving this unhappy business? Nobody suspicious found on the prowl about this spot, I suppose?"

The park policeman shook his head. He was stolid-looking, with a hint of obstinacy in his square mouth and blunt nose, but an honest, dependable chap enough.

"Not a sign, Mr. Framling. I've kept a keen eye myself by day and night, and one of the other men has done the same—of course, without knowing anything of the facts. I can't say that anything unusual has happened."

"Well, I don't know. There's one rather queer thing. Very likely there's nothing in it, after all. I expect it's just that my sight's not too good, now I'm getting on in years. But it is queer."

He looked at us, I thought, a little defiantly.

"In what way?" I asked.

"That dark patch on the gravel where Mr. Gregory fell," Crampton said abruptly. "You remember the sort of stain that was left; at least, it looked like a stain."

Our eyes were automatically turned on the fatal spot. Yes, undoubtedly the stain was still there. And yet . . .

Perhaps Crampton read my thoughts, for he said: "I think Mr. Murchison has noticed it already. Walk right up to it, will you? That's right. Well, now . . .?"

"Standing right over it," Framling said slowly, "the gravel here is as white as the rest. Has it been regraveled, Crampton? Is that what you mean?"

Crampton said: "No nothing has been done. Professor Branden came one day and took a sample of the gravel, but otherwise it has not been disturbed. You see, then! There's no stain. Not what you'd call a stain."

Framling and I walked slowly backward for, perhaps, some ten or fifteen yards. As the distance grew, so there seemed to grow, also, a darkening of the ground where he had been. It is rather difficult to explain. It was as if a shadow had suddenly been cast . . .

It was only when I looked more closely—following a quick glance at Crampton's rather pasty-pale face—that I saw the exact significance of the illusion. If it was an illusion, Framling saw it at the same time, and I saw his lips compress nervously.

The shadow—or stain, if you will—was the exact semblance of a sprawling body. It was almost as if Gregory himself lay there before our eyes. I don't know . . . As if the husk and flesh of the man had been destroyed, but the ego that was its complementary remained.

IT WAS neither a shadow nor a stain, yet somehow it was both. It was there and it was not there. It was something, I think, that one saw with the eye of the mind rather than the physical eye.

The whole thing gave me a sense of horror. It was so uncanny—there in bright sunlight, with people treading, as it were, upon Gregory's apparition—that I felt my hair rise.

Framling said: "Good Lord! But there's nothing there, Crampton. Nothing, really. That is even more insane than the other thing."

"How did you first come to discover it?" I asked.

Crampton smiled strangely.

"It's like one of these picture puzzles, isn't it? You know the kind I mean. Find a face hidden in a tree. Once it hits your eye you never lose it."

He shrugged his shoulders and continued: "An elderly pair came up to me just about dusk, Monday evening, and said there was a man lying on the path by the rockery here. Naturally I hurried along, thinking someone was ill. And I saw—this."

"The old couple saw it too: as it is, I mean. You never saw faces more scared. They went off in a hurry, muttering something about the path being haunted. Since then two others have come to me with the same story about a man stretched on the gravel. Mr. Murchison, it's—it's devilish."

What the explanation may be I do not know. It appears to me that perhaps that explanation of Professor Branden—given in the light of our later discoveries—most closely approximates to truth. Branden's theory was that the liquid used in Gregory's body annihilation held some peculiar photogenic property.

In other words, he held that Gregory's body had been photographed, as it might be, on the elastic solid which theorists call the ether.

This was, I believe, the sole hint he ever obtained toward his unhappy after-attempts to discover the components of the amber fluid.

We were still discussing this dreadful shadow mockery of poor Gregory when Hermann accidentally found us. His bewilderment was added to our own. Manifestly, the whole sum of human experience was helpless to achieve understanding here.

Hermann said presently: "This saves me some ringing on the phone. I've just come from the premier. He received at his house, this morning, another letter from Toad. You had better read it for yourselves."

The letter was, as I expected, brief and

to the point, just like the other ones.

Mr. Hannaford, I can no longer tolerate delay. Since the mountain will not come to Mahomet, Mahomet must go to the mountain. I shall call upon you at your office at eight o'clock on Monday night next, when I shall present incontestable evidence of my right to demand from the world whatever it pleases me. Victoria's share of the price of immunity now stands at one million pounds sterling.

Toad.

Hermann commented: "As mad as a hatter, of course. But a fool, for all that."

I said: "Why a fool?"

"Because he gives himself into our hands," the detective said jubilantly. "Do you think that we will ever let him go, once we have him?"

"What does the premier say?" Framling asked.

"He thinks as I do, that Toad is merely bluffing, in a kind of insane malice. And that reminds me, George. The premier, at all events, cannot be present on Monday evening. He's a pretty sick man. He wishes Sir Hector Corrilees to preside in his place. If Toad turns up . . ."

"I can't believe he would overlook the threat of arrest," I felt impelled to say. "Very likely he feels secure enough to defy anything of the kind. It's my belief that he will keep this appointment."

"If he does," Hermann said stubbornly, "he's a goner. Make no mistake about that, Murchison. Why, man, what is there to prevent my arresting him? He's only human, as we are."

I said nothing, but somehow I wasn't impressed. It was incredible that Toad would not foresee and safeguard himself. A man clever enough to compound so diabolical a thing as the amber fluid was not to be caught napping that way.

CHAPTER 8

Satanoil!

FOllowing a night of bad dreams I rose early on Sunday morning and went for a brisk walk in and around the Fitzroy Gardens. The weather was doing one of those climatic

about faces so typical of Melbourne and the dawn was cheerless and chill. From the trees birds sounded the dirge of a wormless melancholy.

As I walked, the city emerged slowly from the shadows in a stark nudity of chimney-potted skyline, wiping the smoke and train oil from her face with a rag of cold wind, and reaching for the powder and lipstick of urban respectability.

I was experiencing a great uneasiness. Some alarming thoughts had come to me in the night, and I sough now to view them squarely.

Not all my loyalty to Nancy could dispel my new and astounding fear that her father was, in some mysterious way, associated with Toad. Indeed, I had actually—during one of the night's dark depressions—contemplated a theory that Rufus Carlisle was himself Toad.

In the horrifying second during which I had struggled to cast this thought from me, I seemed to know that his mental disorder was merely the cloak of a consummate cunning, and that beneath it crouched the wild beast of an incomparable wickedness.

In the comforting light of day I was able to realize how outrageous a theory this was. I was thoroughly ashamed of the mental panic which had led me into so clumsy a moral trap. I escaped it almost on sight, as it were; but the shock stimulated a suspicion of which I had long been conscious.

Now I brought it ruthlessly into the open. Was it possible, I thought, that Mertz was Toad, or was a creature of Toad's? Was Rufus Carlisle's unbalance being made use of to his own and our undoing?

In the light of this new thought many of the old man's actions now appeared sinisterly suggestive. Whence came his sudden urge to proclaim with such fierce insistence the impending destruction of mankind? And to what insane lengths might not such apocalyptic fanaticism be driven, under the spur of evil influence? I was to find answer to this—in part, at least—before that Sabbath day was closed.

Not for worlds would I have spoken my uneasiness aloud. But I vowed secretly to study the old man under the micro-

scope of my suspicions. I decided that at the earliest opportunity I would endeavor to discover where he had gone with Mertz that night before. I would pick up the trail where Nancy had left it, and see where it led me.

Framling and I—better still, Crampton and I might spend a day in the vicinity of the Carlton Lane where Nancy had lost him.

Useless to torture myself with remorse over the result of that decision. I have comforted myself with the reflection that my choice of Crampton, which was eventually to bring him to an inconceivably dreadful end, was something beyond my control.

The morning and afternoon passed quietly. Toward evening Rufus Carlisle left the house. Only for the fact that I had promised Nancy to attend with her the evening service at St. Paul's Cathedral, I think I would have followed him there and then. But it was the first Sunday since we had become engaged; Nancy wanted to go to the service, and I was quite willing.

We entered the cathedral by the southwest porch. Presently the service began. It was so long since I had attended church that I was glad of Nancy's guiding book. But the hymns I knew, and if my voice was rusty from disuse, at least I sang heartily and happily. Prayers and lessons, and then the offertory. The congregation settled itself for the sermon.

The archbishop had mounted to the pulpit, and there came the little hush which marks the preacher's gathering of his thought to purposeful speech. I was looking idly at the white-gowned choristers in the choir seats . . .

And suddenly came interruption. Into the cathedral quiet came a man's voice—high, penetrating, cutting the silence as if with a sword—a fierce, exultant voice that seemed to fall from the vault of heaven itself.

"Behold, the end of all things is at hand. The world being overflowed with water perished, but now is reserved unto fire against the day of judgment and perdition of unrighteous men . . ."

The congregation sat as if paralyzed. I saw the Archbishop turn in amazement, and a verger hurriedly left his seat in the

aisle. Nancy's hand gripped my arm so strongly that I winced. Her face had gone deathly white.

AND all the while the hidden voice spoke its eerie threat: "For fire shall turn to water, and water to fire; and they two shall be one; and there shall be a new Heaven and a new earth . . ."

The worshipers were rousing now from their stupor of outraged surprise. A man at my elbow, whose curiosity evidently outweighed his sense of church ethics, was almost on his feet, in an effort to discover where the unorthodox preacher was stationed.

A second man, youthful and alert, whom I immediately took to be a newspaper reporter, was tiptoeing down the west aisle toward the chancel, brazenly clutching a wad of copy paper.

The precentor and a second verger were standing by the choir gate. I saw the first point upward suddenly toward the gallery that runs high above the altar.

" . . . and the elements shall melt with fervent heat . . ."

I heard a sob catch in Nancy's throat. I sensed rather than heard the terrified whisper from her trembling lips.

"Maurice. Oh, Maurice. It's—Daddy."

She half rose, but I managed to restrain her.

"Sit down, dearest," I said. "We can do no good. Steady. If we attract attention it may lead to his hurt. They can't know who he is, and he might get away."

Old Rufus had, in fact, ceased his fulminations. The Archbishop, with admirable nerve, was announcing his text.

Regardless of being seen I put my arm about Nancy's shaking body. Her eyes were closed, and I think she was on the point of fainting. My mind was in a ferment, through which the impulsive tones of the preacher came at brief, uncertain intervals . . .

I roused Nancy gently.

"We can slip away now, without drawing attention."

I had to support her down the aisle to the door. A verger met us concernedly in the porch. He murmured something about fetching a glass of water. Nancy shook her head feebly.

I said: "Thanks, no. If she might rest

here a moment, while I go get a taxi . . .”

He came with me to the outside steps. He said: “That affair was enough to upset any lady. I don’t wonder she looks ill.”

When I reentered the porch Nancy smiled at me bravely. The verger was still there, and I could no longer forbear the question that was tormenting both Nancy and myself.

I said: “Did they catch the poor fellow, do you know?”

It seemed an age before the answer came.

“Unfortunately he got away. He must have slipped through into the diocesan buildings. At any rate, he hadn’t been found yet. The mystery is how he ever got into the gallery at all. We’ve been troubled before with cranks of the kind, but never before so sensationnally.”

We were silent during the short drive to Monray Street. Cuthbert and Millie Hollidew were in the sitting room, but there was no sign of Rufus Carlisle.

Miss Hollidew exclaimed at sight of Nancy: “My goodness, what have you been doing to the child, Mr. Murchison?”

I said: “Nancy isn’t feeling very well.”

“My goodness!” reiterated Miss Hollidew. “She looks like a corpse. I’ve some brandy in my room.”

The good-hearted creature almost carried Nancy upstairs, and a little later we could hear her bustling about in the kitchen and crying out to know what had become of the hot-water bag. On the way back to Nancy she put her head in at the door.

“I want her to go to bed, but d’you think she will? She’s worried ill over that old fool of a father of hers. He ought to be put in the asylum.”

She vanished again precipitately, leaving Cuthbert and me to stare at each other.

I said: “What a warm heart Miss Hollidew has, Mr. Weinseidle.”

Cuthbert said: “Undoubtedly.”

He pulled his little bit of a mustache and nodded at me almost humanly. My praise of Miss Hollidew had evidently touched him.

A moment later Rufus Carlisle stumbled in and fell to his knees by the piano stool.

The man was a scarecrow. His clothes were torn and dirty, and he shook like a

leaf. His eyes were two live coals set in a china-white face. He began to mumble inarticulately, beating his thin hands together.

The spectacle was too much for Cuthbert’s reserve. He said: “Old boy’s been on a jag. Might have fallen off a street car by the look of him. Absolutely!”

“Mr. Weinseidle, I know you like Nancy,” I said. “Will you promise me something for her sake?”

He said: “Undoubtedly.”

I said: “If you hear or read of anything unusual which took place in St. Paul’s Cathedral this evening, please say nothing to anyone about this poor old man here. I don’t want to speak any plainer. I’m sure you will understand.”

Cuthbert nodded.

“AND if you can give Miss Hollidew the hint, I’ll be doubly grateful,” I said. “It’s a strangely sad world, Mr. Weinseidle. If we don’t help each other now and then, we’re lost to happiness. You’ll keep your own counsel, won’t you?”

He did a thing that endeared his eccentricity to me for always. He stood up and very shyly offered his hand.

“Sure, Mr. Murchison . . . fond of Nancy, y’know . . . glad to help.”

I said: “I wonder if we could persuade Mr. Carlisle to go to bed, without troubling Nancy.”

To my surprise, Cuthbert winked. He put his face down to the old man’s and said: “Satanoil!”

The effect upon Rufus Carlisle was amazing. He looked at Cuthbert with an expression of terror such as I hope never again to see on the face of any living creature. He put out a shaking hand, as if to ward off a blow.

Cuthbert said: “Hadn’t you better go to bed, Mr. Carlisle? Listen: Satanoil.”

“In Heaven’s name,” Rufus Carlisle mumbled, “who are you? You’re not—you’re not—I’ll go, I’ll go. You wouldn’t do that. No, no! Not that name . . .”

I believe I am not wrong in stating that he ran from the room. We heard him clawing his way up the stairs and then the thud of his bedroom door closing. The whole thing was so astonishing that for the moment I was speechless. Even Cuth-

bert seemed shaken by the result of his effort.

I said presently. "How on earth did you do that? What was that you said to him, Mr. Weinseidle?"

He answered: "I said, Satanoil."

"Satanoil! What does that mean?"

"I'm hanged if I know, Mr. Murchison. Honest I don't. There was a chap here before you came, fellow named Mertz. Queer bird. I heard him say that to the old boy one time, and the old chap nearly took a fit. Just thought I'd try it on him now."

I could think of nothing to say for the moment, but: "Did Mertz know that you overheard?"

"I don't think so. Didn't see me. Only passing, y'know."

I repeated the name aloud several times, trying to find a clue to the meaning.

"Satanoil. Satanoil."

The significance stared me in the face, and yet I could not grasp it.

At this moment, Mollie Hollidev rejoined us. She said: "Did you ever see the like of old Rufus Carlisle? Cuthbert, I simply must have a cigarette. The old boy looks as if he's been hit by a cyclone, and he's rattier than ever. Nancy's seeing him into bed.

"I was to tell you, Mr. Murchison, that she's feeling well again, and will be down in the kitchen in a minute or two."

While I waited in the kitchen I lit the gas stove, just for the comfort of seeing the flames. Nancy came in very quietly and shut the door. She came straight to me and put her head on my shoulder. She cried a little.

I tried to comfort her. I said: "Well, he's come home safe and sound. We must be thankful for that. It isn't as bad as it seems, you know. They'll never find out who it was. I don't suppose they'll even try."

She said: "It isn't so much that part of it, Maurice. It's the general hopelessness and depression of everything. All sorts of queer, horrible things seem to be going on all around us. I feel sometimes as if I were living in the middle of a nightmare, and that none of us really existed outside my dream. And I get frightened . . . nothing will ever hurt you or take you away from me, will it?"

"Not if I have any say in the matter," I said. "Come, we mustn't get morbid. A good sleep and you'll feel ever so much better in the morning."

"Maurice," she said, "who is Mr. Mertz?"

I almost answered, "Toad." But, apart from my caution, I couldn't be sure that I'd been right in saying so. I don't know even now if it was so. I think it was, but I don't know.

What I did say was: "Does it matter, dearest? I mean, I expect he's just an ordinary kind of mortal, a little eccentric, perhaps, who has a quaint liking for your father. It isn't fair of us to lay everything at Mertz's door, for we really can't be sure that his influence is evil."

"It is . . . it is," Nancy said passionately. "Maurice, a woman knows these things instinctively. I always felt that there was something horrible about Mr. Mertz. Always. There's an uncleanness, a wickedness . . ."

I said: "Never fear, it can't touch us. Look here, I promise to find out all about Mertz for you, within a day or two. That ought to be easy enough."

"Be careful," she said. I felt a little shudder go through her. "Maurice, be careful. In some way that I can't understand I know that he's dangerous. Promise that you will not go alone."

"I'll take Crampton with me." I laughed. "We'll make a start at the spot where you last saw your Dad with Mertz; that lane in Carlton. Crampton's big enough to eat half a dozen of your Mertzes. I promise we'll be careful."

This seemed to soothe her, and a little later I was able to persuade her to go to bed.

CHAPTER 9

Tonight I Come

WHEN I entered the Treasury next morning I knew a little stir of trepidation and excitement in my veins. I felt that the night would mark further extraordinary happenings. The paramount thought was: Will Toad reveal himself?

I still believed that he would. We were about to enter a new phase of this uni-

quely abominable experience. I felt it profoundly.

Almost as soon as I entered the building I encountered George Framling. He smiled at me rather strangely and held out a letter. It was addressed *Maurice Murchison, Esq., One of the Seven, Premier's Office, Melbourne.*

I opened it. There was nothing but a small oblong of white cardboard. On it was roughly drawn a toad with its thick squat body covered with warts or tubercles, and the pored protuberance behind each eye. Underneath the drawing this line was hand printed:

Bufo vulgaris. He spits poison.

Somehow I could not resist grinning. It had, no doubt, been intended to scare me: actually it had the opposite effect. The melodrama was overdone. That is the worst of your criminal—he cannot resist a theatrical strutting.

I suppose I must have looked a question, for Framling said: "Yes, as far as I know, we each got one: Hermann did, for he rang me up to tell me. You'll find that the premier, Branden, Sir Hector, and Crampton were similarly honored in this morning's mail. It's a crude threat."

"The point that occurs to me," I said, "is that it shows Toad has a complete knowledge of who we are and what we are. It is evident he wanted to let us know this on the eve of declaring himself. I don't quite like that part of it. He must be fully equipped to defy us."

"I can't see it," Framling said. "Hermann says it's sheer bluff. He says Toad can't possibly be such a fool as to put himself into our hands. It doesn't stand to reason."

I reminded him of the appalling death of Mr. Gregory: "Toad is too evidently outside ordinary methods and manners. He tells us so, here on this card. He may have chosen a crude way of doing so—in fact, he admits it, for he boasts of himself as *bufo vulgaris*—but he means business, all the same. He can spit poison. He has proved it, and he is prepared to prove it again."

"Perhaps you're right, Maurice. If we knew what the poison consisted of, we could look for the antidote. The trouble

is that we don't know. As Branden said, it's an outrage on probability."

I inquired how the premier was.

"Not at all well. There isn't a chance of having him with us tonight. He's as worried as the devil. I'm to report all that takes place at the earliest opportunity. Sir Hector Corrilees had a long talk with Mr. Hannaford yesterday, and I fancy they arrived at some decision. Sir Hector has full power to speak for the premier tonight."

For the remainder of the day the matter rested there. Routine vents claimed our attention. The sole interlude was provided by Professor Branden, who looked in briefly to ask whether Framling and I had received cards.

He said: "Well, Mr. Murchison, the chase grows stern."

"At any rate, we hope to sight the quarry soon," I replied.

He smiled a little sadly.

"I'm utterly depressed. I thought I knew something of chemical science, but it appears that I really know very little. I haven't a ghost of an idea what this darned amber fluid is. I feel like a child groping its way through the most ordinary lessons. I'm ashamed and humbled. I'm . . ."

I had an uncomfortable impression that he was on the point of breaking down completely. His face was haggard and his voice shook.

I interjected hastily: "You take altogether too severe a view of your own measure of responsibility, Professor. No man could do more than you have, seeing the complete fog in which you are forced to work. I don't see how you can expect to discover anything, having nothing at all to go on."

But he would not listen to this.

"It's my job, and I've failed. Sometimes I'm tempted to beg Mr. Hannaford to hand the task elsewhere. Johns of Adelaide, or Paul Birkett, from the Bureau of Science and Industry. Both keen, clever men. They might succeed. The only thing that holds me is that poor Gregory was my friend. I want to avenge him myself. I tell you, Murchison, I will discover this devil's brew. I will—if it kills me."

He calmed, presently, and went away.

And so the day passed.

Nancy and I had tea cosily together in the evening. Mollie Hollidew was dining with Cuthbert in the city, and old Rufus Carlisle had wandered away early in the afternoon. Nancy, I thought, seemed much happier about him.

She said: "He was so quiet and gentle this morning. It was lovely to see him. He kissed me of his own accord, and spoke of mother—a thing he hasn't done for years. Such a grave, solemn old chap, as if all the cares of the world were resting on his poor shoulders."

I hated leaving her alone in the house, but it could not be helped. I had told her that I had some special correspondence of the premier's to attend to, and I should probably be home late. I made her promise that she would not leave the house on any pretext whatever.

She did so laughingly.

"Why, Maurice, how dreadfully serious you look. Of course, I can't go out. I have to wait in for father."

Not being able to tell her about Toad, I had to pretend that my seriousness was unconscious.

I said: "It is having to leave you that gives me a dour look, I expect. Anyway, I always hated correspondence, letter writing is an art of which I know nothing."

I found Hermann strolling up and down in front of the Treasury main entrance. I knew from the enthusiastic grip of his handshake that he was feeling in fine fettle. Indeed, he presently unburdened himself with all the naiveté of school girl attending her first party.

"If Toad comes tonight, Murchison, it's his finish. I'll have a plainclothes man hiding around every exit in the building. He can't escape, no matter how he tries. No one is to interfere with him if and when he enters. We'll be like the good old British bulldog, Murchison. We don't object to his coming, but we do object to his going."

The detective was rubbing his hands together in a pleasurable sense of impending triumph. I thought the optimism ill-judged, but refrained from saying so.

He knew my opinion and was not all impressed by it. It would have been idle to labor my point. And after all, I didn't want to be thought presumptuous. His

experience was far greater than mine.

Sir Hector Corrilees, Professor Branden, and Framling, I now learned, were already waiting in the premier's room. On the arrival, shortly, of Crampton, we three joined the others. I looked at the clock on the mantel, as I took my seat at Framling's side. It pointed ten minutes to eight o'clock.

Ten minutes until we saw him face to face—the Toad that spat poison. We sat stiffly, and our faces grew tense . . .

CHAPTER 10

So Water Won't Burn?

THOSE ten minutes seemed an eternity of waiting. I suppose this was because every man of us was silent. The chief commissioner sat in the premier's chair, his large mouth twisted in a thoughtful grimace, and his hands clasped squarely on top of his almost bald head.

Professor Branden, thin and angular, sat at Sir Hector's elbow. He was staring into a vacancy and his lips moved soundlessly.

Hermann and Crampton were stationed one on either side of the room, close to the inner door of green baize. Their position was a strategic one and argued ill for Toad's escape by the way he would enter. The detective's farmer-like face held a grim smile, in which was blended resolve and doubt. He caught my eye and nodded briefly, as if to emphasize his scepticism.

Sir Hector broke the quiet by saying: "The ordinary messenger is in attendance outside, you said, Framling?"

"Yes," George replied. "I gave him no name. I merely instructed that a visitor might call, asking to see the premier: in which case, Baines was to show him in here. He was then to inform the two plainclothes men who are waiting in the clerk's room opposite. The three will take up a position outside the premier's door."

Sir Hector was muttering his approval of this, when the clock on the mantel chimed eight. With the last stroke, as it seemed, the baize door opened to disclose the stolid features of the messenger, Baines.

He said: "A gentleman to see the

premier, sir. May I show him in, now?"

"Show him in," Sir Hector snapped.

He said under his breath, darting a look at Hermann: "There's punctuality for you. Now, gentlemen, watch yourselves."

His face was set.

Hermann's astonishment was plain to see. In spite of his careful preparations, he had never really expected Toad to keep the appointment. Nor, I think, had any of us but myself. But mine had been intuition rather than a reasoning of probabilities.

I was still tasting my fortuitous triumph when Toad came into the room.

Three times I have attempted to draw a pen portrait of this man—as we saw him then, for the first time, openly—and three times I have scored out what I have written. The truth is that Toad somehow defies description. The likeness is here at the back of my mind, but I cannot focus it.

Let me try once more.

He was short and squat; globular face, with high, bushy brows, a wide straight slit of a mouth, and flattened nostrils. His cheekbones were oblique, Eastern. A short, dun-colored down—scarcely to be described as hair—covered his skull. The flesh of his throat was in folds.

No; I have failed again. This reads as the description of some animal, not of a man. Let it stand, in all its crude, inhuman ugliness. Add to this the eyes: large, with drowsy lids, and pouched below the eyeballs; a flame-colored iris . . .

This was the face that confronted us presently from across the premier's table. I was reminded of some carnival mask set upon thick, humping shoulders—coldly impassive, fascination in its superlative arrogance.

Sir Hector Corrilees said curtly: "You are Toad?"

The voice which replied was smooth, yet concise and faintly ironic.

"I am Toad. But you are not the premier."

"Mr. Hannaford is ill," Sir Hector said, in his quick, uncompromising tones. "He deputed me to hear what you have to say."

A little curious sound escaped Professor Branden. He was staring at Toad intently, his mouth hung open and his

brows were frowning. Suddenly he appeared to grasp the thought in his mind. He pointed a lean, accusing finger.

"I remember you now. You're Michael Domidorf. Of course. How stupid of me to forget . . ."

Toad said: "I was always just ahead of you in class, Branden, wasn't I? I'm still ahead, you see."

This, I believe, was the keynote to the man—his insane egotism. His crazy genius stood astride his world of self, and fretted to stand astride the souls of men. He lusted for power, like some demoniac demigod, and felt the scepter of it already in his hands.

"Domidorf . . ."

"Toad, at your service, Branden."

"Toad, the . . ." Branden's voice rose thinly. "Your criminal lunacy might be expected to welcome even the perversion of a name. What hellish thing did you do to Stephen Gregory? Answer me that, before we call you to account . . ."

The flicker of a smile crossed Toad's face.

"You're hysterical, Branden. Gregory brought about his own death. As well blame your Maker when the lightning strikes you."

"You're not omnipotent."

"So near to that, Branden," Toad said unemotionally, "that I can afford to overlook your childishness."

Sir Hector Corrilees interrupted.

"Branden, please. Now, you Toad, as you style yourself. I hardly believe that you'd be brazen enough, for all your hardihood, to put yourself so completely in our hands. Of that we'll talk later. We'll hear first what you have to say."

Again that flicker of a smile.

"Brave words, Corrilees, but they won't help you. Why, you fools, I hold you in the hollow of my hand. I can destroy you and your world. The earth is mine and the fullness thereof. I shall take toll of the nations. And no man dare lift his hand against me, lest I wreck the universe. Power, Branden—that's what I hold."

A MADMAN, plainly. And yet the thought brought no comfort. If he had ranted . . . But his voice was not even raised in emphasis. He might have

been stating plain, everyday facts, for all of his cold, unbalanced emotion. Only his eyes betrayed the exultation of his thought. Their flame seemed to ebb and flow.

Sir Hector Corrilees was unpleasantly amused. It was evident that now he thought he knew precisely the kind of man with whom we were dealing.

He said, glancing at Hermann: "So that's it, is it? Well, Hermann, I don't think we need wait any longer, do you? We can't hang you, Toad, but we can do the next best thing. We can put you where your destructive notions can't do any harm. And we'll do it now."

His strong teeth bit the end from a cigar. He looked at Framling and me, as much as to say: "Well, all the upset is over. The premier is going to be mighty relieved to hear the truth of it."

Hermann and Crampton had come quietly forward. They stood each at Toad's elbow, the very incarnation of stern, relentless officialdom. Hermann had a pair of handcuffs in his hand. He was grinning a little. He even allowed himself to joke.

He said: "Now, then, Napoleon, you're keeping the court waiting. And there's the battle of Waterloo to be seen to."

"Wait," Toad said quietly.

Some quality in his voice struck the grin from Hermann's face. Sir Hector sensed it, too, for he paused in the lighting of his cigar, to peer uncertainly at Toad.

"Do you think," the smooth, chill voice proceeded, "that I was so incredibly stupid as not to foresee this action on your part? I have taken all precautions against it. This will be plainer when I have demonstrated what I have come to demonstrate."

"I said that I would produce incontestable proof of my right to dictate not only to this Government, but to the governments and peoples of the entire earth. Incidentally, Branden's curiosity may obtain a hint as to the method of Gregory's death."

"And suppose we prefer not to see this precious demonstration?" Sir Hector said.

Toad replied, with a careless shrug of his shoulders: "In that case you will precipitate the most stupendous calamity which has ever fallen upon mankind. I warn you, I am sane and serious."

The allusion to Gregory, I could see, had caught the attention of Professor Branden. He was a-quiver, in a scientific sense, to establish the identity of the amber fluid.

He said: "A little further delay, Sir Hector, can hardly matter. If there is any demonstration, however absurd, it might not be amiss to have it."

I smile sadly now when I think of our cocksureness. For the moment, even my fears had been calmed. I was seeing Toad as a bombastic lunatic who had poisoned Gregory by means of some obscure chemistry and was threatening to poison us all in the pursuit of his monstrous ambitions. Of the shocking truth I had no conception.

"Go ahead if you wish," replied Sir Hector.

"Thank you. Will some one bring me water, preferably in an iron basin. Not more than a tumblerful. Also, allow me—for your sakes, rather than my own—to stand here, a little apart."

At Sir Hector's nod Hermann and Crampton drew away a few paces. Framling left the room to obtain what was required.

Hermann said bluntly: "No tricks. There are six of us here, and there are men posted inside and outside the building. You can't get away. Besides, at the first sign of any funny business, I shall shoot to kill."

"When I leave here, as I shall shortly, it will be by myself and with your full permission," Toad said.

Hermann sneered incredulously.

Framling came back with a small enamel basin. He said, as he handed this to Toad: "Is that enough water?"

"A little too much," Toad said. He poured some into the fireplace, and set the basin on a chair.

He turned then to Branden, the red of his eyes glowing. "Branden, what would you say if I told you that I could burn water?"

"What?" Branden exclaimed.

Suddenly he laughed outright in thin, reedy tones. He said, "Are you as mad as that? I'm sorry, Sir Hector; I've wasted your time after all."

"Wait," Toad said. "Suppose you tell us, Branden, why water will not ignite,

as the world now understands ignition."

BRANDEN said mechanically: "Every child knows that water will not burn because it cannot combine with the oxygen of the atmosphere. That is a scientific fact."

"Allow me then to introduce you to Satanoil," Toad said.

Some small object—I could not distinguish what it was—fell from his hand into the basin. Immediately he stepped away from it, his palms before his eyes.

Satanoil! . . . For a second I had a vision of old Rufus Carlisle kneeling at the piano stool, with Cuthbert's face lowered to speak that very word. *Satanoil . . . Satanoil . . .* The full meaning of the name burst upon me.

And as instantaneously the thing itself burst upon our astounded senses. From the basin shot a single wide tongue of jade-green flame, edged with bright orange. It rose three or four feet in the air and spread like a fan. There was no noise of its burning but the room was pervaded by a sudden enormous sensation of heat. I could hear the tiny cracking of the enamel lining the basin, which seemed to rock on the chair.

As swiftly as it had come, so the flame died. Nothing remained but a thin green haze immediately over the basin. My eyes were paining in the way they had pained once before, when I had incautiously looked at the flame of an oxy-acetylene welding process. There was a faint acridness in the air.

Professor Branden's face was aghast. He said: "What—what—what—" over and over like a child.

Beyond that was the silence of utter consternation. Sir Hector Corrilees was breathing like a man in a fit. Crampton was wiping tears of hurt from his eyes, while Framling's face was buried in his hands.

On this silence came the smooth voice of Toad.

"When I said I had taken precautions against my arrest here tonight, I might have said that they had to do with this thing that I call Satanoil. How do you like the name, Branden?"

"Never mind that now. The point is this. Should I not return to a certain

place by midnight, what happened in this basin will happen in the river.

"I need say no more. You have imagination enough to visualize the picture. Fresh water or salt, a drop of Satanoil will do for it what one match will do for a forest. The river runs to the ocean, and the ocean to other oceans. Touch me and the world burns. You begin to understand at last the tremendous power that I wield.

"And now for my terms. You pay me one million pounds as Victoria's share in the price of the world's immunity. I have done with playing. I give you one week to consent. If at this hour today in a week the acceptance of the government is not notified to me through the columns of the press, I shall punish swiftly. And I shall go on punishing until my will is done."

"You devil!" Branden choked.

Sir Hector Corrilees seemed to rouse himself from a state of stupefaction.

He said hoarsely: "What guarantee do we have that even if we agree to this preposterous sum in payment, further demands will not be made on us?"

For the first time Toad ceased to smile.

"None. If it's my will you go on paying. The world pays or perishes. You talk of the great kings of the earth! Bah! Never a king in history such as I shall be. Science, Branden; power. Satanoil, Branden. Get over that if you can!"

Branden said: "Are you human? Was it with that you murdered poor Gregory? You black-hearted devil!"

Toad was impervious. There was no change in his cool, unangered tones.

"The wet of his veins fed the flames, Branden. As a quick and effective means of suicide I can recommend Satanoil. A drop on your tongue . . ."

I saw Herman reach out a great hand toward him as he turned to the door. Sir Hector Corrilees saw it, too, and called harshly: "Let him go, Hermann. We daren't risk it. Tell those men outside—"

His voice broke sharply.

Toad paused, his flame-colored iris glowing from the shadowed doorway. In the dimness of my aching sight his features seemed to puff and swell.

He said: "So water won't burn, eh, Branden? Well, you're wiser now."

As he turned a hideous travesty of laughter left his lips.

CHAPTER 11

Calling Mr. X

GEORGE FRAMLING, on his own initiative, told the mystified plain-clothes police and the messenger Baines that they were no longer required.

When he returned from doing so he drew my attention to the basin used in Toad's demonstration. The enamel lining was cracked and melted—evidence of the terrific heat to which it had been subjected. Not a vestige of moisture remained.

The green haze or smoke had also vanished. As in the case of poor Gregory, it had slowly and imperceptibly thinned into nothingness.

I could not help wondering whether here, also, the air held an imperishable photographic record of events. It seemed to me that in that confined space there was a possibility that the whole contents of the room might thus be impressed upon the atmosphere.

Given certain conditions of lighting and perspective, I thought, our tragic group might be reproduced—as it were, superimposed upon the room itself—long after its individual members were scattered and dead.

My theory proved correct, but in part only. This curious photogenic property of Satanoil would appear to have been limited in effect to within two or three feet of its action only. As a consequence, in this case its influence was confined to Toad—who stood nearest—and the chair and basin.

Some four times, I believe, persons have claimed since to have seen this phantom, and on this basis is founded the superstition still current that the premier's room in the Treasury building is haunted. The effect, I am told, is that of a short, stocky man standing, hands before his face, close to a chair holding a basin. On all four occasions the hour was around dusk and the lighting was natural.

The scientific and curious may make what they will of this phenomenon. I venture no opinion, except to state that I doubt that Toad himself was aware of

it. In any event, I am certain it was beyond his designing. Professor Branden was emphatic on this point.

It was the primary property of Satanoil that was concerning him, now. I could read in his expression that he was doubting his own sanity. All his preconceived notions and precise scientific maxims had tumbled about his ears. The impossible had become possible.

Sir Hector Corrilees was striding about the room. He halted abruptly, and said: "Shocking! Shocking! A terrible power to be in the hands of any man, let alone a criminal. No man, sane or insane, is to be trusted with such power."

Framling said: "Satanoil. It's well named."

Professor Branden struck his forehead.

"Gentlemen, it violates all established principles of science. And yet—you saw it. You saw water burn. What do I say? Am I mad, myself? Corrilees—Murchison—you saw it. Say you saw it . . ."

It was some time before the hysteria of his fear left him. Crampton ran for some brandy. Upon this Branden revived sufficiently to reply to Sir Hector.

The chief commissioner asked: "Can you hazard an explanation? I want to understand what I can of your point of view. Water, you told us, will not burn because it cannot be made to combine with the oxygen of the air. I take it, then, that Toad has effected this combination. Am I right?"

"How else?" Branden murmured.

He paused a moment, wetting his lips with a trembling tongue.

"The chemist distinguishes bodies into simple and compound substances. A chemical union is not merely a mixture of the components, such as would take place if we shook together white and black sand, but an entirely new substance is formed with properties utterly different from any of its constituents.

"Water—as said—to burn must combine with the oxygen of the air. It is first necessary to decompose it into its equivalent gases. But when this is done, these gases immediately combine to return to the original state—water."

Branden stared at us in turn. "And so it becomes necessary—if water is to burn—not only to decompose it into its gases,

but to fix those gases for at least sufficiently long to permit their ignition. Some intermediary has to be found which frees and ignites in a continuously evolving process. In Satanoil Toad has apparently discovered this intermediary . . . Sir Hector, what is to be done?"

"I wish I knew," Corrilees said. His own face was gray. "We must confer at once with the premier. God help us . . . If the world knew, it would become insane with fear. The destruction of the entire globe is at the will of one man—and that man a dangerous lunatic."

"Say, rather, perverted genius," Branden said. "In all my horror I cannot escape the brilliance of what he has done. To have achieved such a thing as that . . ."

Hermann interposed: "Professor, you addressed him as Michael Domidorf? I saw the name on the class lists and traced it, as I thought, to a harmless conclusion. Domidorf is supposed to have died ten years back. I saw the entry in the register."

"Nevertheless, as you see," Branden said, with a weary smile, "Domidorf is alive. For reasons of his own, no doubt, he preferred to be thought dead. It is not very difficult to perpetrate a fraud of that description, Hermann. A medical corpse, and a venal registrar, and the thing is done. Michael Domidorf died and some other name was taken. We must find what that other name is. Everything now, depends upon it."

"In what way?" asked Hermann.

"We have a week of truce. It is unlikely that Toad would entrust a confederate permanently with the means of so dreadful a world holocaust. Depend upon it, this confederate is ignorant of the deadly property of his task. He is told, should Toad not return at a certain hour, to do a certain thing. It is, one presumes, that he empty a certain liquid into the Yarra River.

"He is unaware of the tremendous results that will follow his act. It would be easy to deceive such a man. He might be told, for example, that the liquid was to be thus disposed of in order that it should not fall into the hands of the police."

I think we all followed this reasoning readily enough.

Hermann said, "I believe you've hit on it."

"And so, you see," Branden continued, "it is extremely improbable that Toad—fearing that in ignorance his confederate may bungle and precipitate disaster—will trust another in the intervals of his hiding. He feels tolerably safe from discovery."

"In fact, I believe this is at the bottom of the murder of poor Gregory. Toad dares not be caught at a time when he has not the safeguard of his confederate. Gregory was a threat, therefore Toad destroyed him."

"You say confederate," Sir Hector Corrilees questioned. "Why not confederates?"

"For the reasons already stated," Branden replied. "Satanoil, as Toad well knows, is too dangerous a thing to play with. A single confederate is all he needs."

AT THIS point my attention wandered. I was, in short, testing the horror of my own thought. I could no longer escape the conclusion that Nancy's father was the confederate of whom Branden had made mention.

All the facts pointed to it. If I had been sure that no other confederate existed—that old Rufus Carlisle was alone in his hideous, if unconscious, partnership of evil—I think I should have made my conclusions known to the rest.

But I was not sure. I felt that before committing myself to a step which must inevitably bring sorrow to the girl I loved, I ought first to settle this point beyond doubt.

That is to say, I must identify Toad with Mertz. If Toad and Mertz were not one and the same, then Mertz was also a confederate. There was also the man who had masqueraded as the Chinese herbalist.

Everything was so involved that I would not risk Nancy's hurt until I saw more clearly. It might even be that Mertz, not Rufus Carlisle, was Toad's single confederate, and that the old man was merely coincident in his outburst of adventist mania. And so I decided to keep my own counsel still.

Crampton was sitting stolidly at the end of the table. Under cover of what Professor Branden was saying, I invited

the park policeman to join me next day in a thorough search of the locality where Nancy had lost sight of her father and Mertz.

I said: "If you could get the day off, or manage between shifts, I'd like you to join me in a little tour of exploration. I want to trace a man named Mertz. We may be wasting our time, but I think not."

"I'll go," Crampton said promptly.

I arranged to meet Crampton outside the Treasury at nine o'clock the next morning. I told him of the lane in Carlton, and said that Mertz had been seen to enter the lane one night.

"I know the spot," Crampton said. "A bad quarter. We'll go through that district with a fine-tooth comb."

And knife-like there entered my consciousness the thought of old Rufus Carlisle. *Fire and water . . . water and fire . . . for the firmament shall pass away in flame.* His prophecy.

What did Nancy's father know of this ghastly business?

Crampton lived with his wife in a small wooden cottage on the bank of the Saltwater River. The property was their own, and stood apart from the nearest neighbor by some hundred and fifty yards. The locality is bare and bleak; at night, when the almost invariable wind is howling, it is eerie and hostile.

The Cramptons were alone in the house except for a nine-year-old granddaughter, Mary Jonas—left by their only child, a daughter who had married and died in widowhood. Mary had been formally adopted by her grandparents, who lavished upon her the affection they had known for their daughter.

These scant particulars were told to me by Crampton himself, in the course of our journey by street car to North Carlton, on the morning after our meeting with Toad. The park policeman was likable; a little heavy in conversation, perhaps, but honest as the day.

We got off two stops from the end of the line and set to work to find our bearings.

Crampton said, "Looking for Mertz in here is going to be a slow business. We'll save time if we divide up and take a street each. Are you game to tackle it, Mr. Murchison?"

"Why not?" I asked.

"All right," Crampton said. "You take the street ahead and I'll start in further back. We'll meet at the other end of the lane. Just one word of warning. Don't go inside any of the houses. Any you think worth a look over, make a note of them. We'll go through them together."

I began to appreciate the unsavory lot of the canvasser in mean localities, as I progressed with my task. Progressed is hardly the right word in my own case: retrogressed would describe it more accurately.

I met denial at every door. No one knew the name. Some said so civilly enough; others with abuse. It was plain, in any case, that I was viewed with suspicion.

None the less, I stuck to my task. When it was completed I drew a breath of relief. I had certainly drawn a blank, but the disappointment yielded to a sense of freedom. I lit a cigarette and went to find Crampton.

He was waiting for me at the entrance to the lane. He said: "What luck?" "None. And you?"

He scratched his head.

"Why, I'm not so sure. Did you notice an old building midway along that looked as if it might once have been a factory?"

I had. The building faced upon the street Crampton had canvassed. The lot continued right through to my street, where it was fenced off with broken pickets. It was so obviously unoccupied that I had not bothered to investigate it. I said as much to Crampton.

"The old party in the cottage alongside tells me that it used to be a boot factory," Crampton said. "It's been vacant for some years. The point is, for several nights lately there has been a light in one of the windows."

"A caretaker," I suggested.

"There isn't one. She's a decent old party, this, and she tells me she was afraid it was a gang of roughnecks . . . What's the time?"

I was surprised to find that it was past noon. We had made a late start, and the morning had flown.

"We'll have a bite somewhere, and then we'll overhaul that building, Mr. Murchison."

We found a dingy café, and presently disputed with a horde of flies for possession of muddy coffee and some dubious sandwiches. After a brief smoke we set out for the factory.

CHAPTER 12

A Yellow Marble

IT WAS a two-storied wooden structure, very tumbledown and unprepossessing. The main doors were locked, but we gained entry by a small side door leading into what had once been a boiler house.

The door communicating with the factory proper was also locked. I was looking around for something with which to force it, when my eye fell on an opening cut in the wall, evidently for the purpose of admitting a pulley belt. The boards here were loose, and we soon forced a passage for our bodies.

We stood now in a barn-like area with a concrete floor and a number of concrete pillars. In the dim light we made out a wooden staircase rising beyond.

"Empty enough," Crampton said.

I was about to reply, when a step sounded overhead. Someone was moving about the second story. Not a doubt of it.

"Come on," Crampton said.

We tiptoed up the stairs, arriving at a small landing. To the left ran a board corridor, with here and there an open doorway showing. It marked, I thought, a one-time group of offices. Indeed, at one point projected a name board, bearing the painted inscription: *Secretary*.

Immediately before us was a closed door built of rough hardwood. Crampton tried the handle and found it fast. Upon this he knocked smartly.

"Is there anyone inside?"

There was no reply.

Crampton said, in an undertone: "Look in the other rooms."

I did so, and found them dusty and unoccupied. When I returned Crampton called again.

He said: "Police here. Open this door."

There came suddenly sounds of movement beyond. But still no reply. I seemed once to hear the clink of glass and a hurried footfall.

"Look out," Crampton said.

As I stood aside he seized a broken stair-rail and began to batter at the lock. His was, I think, one of those temperaments which find anger quickly in opposition. The rail was tough and heavy, and his strength was enormous. The door fell inward within a minute, and we after it. I caught a glimpse of a man disappearing into a sort of manhole in the wall at the far end of the chamber.

"After him," Crampton roared.

His foot caught in some obstruction as he spoke, and out of the tail of my eye I saw him fall headlong. Next moment, I was through the manhole upon an outside platform.

Over my head was a great beam, with a pulley at its end, through which depended a rusty iron chain. By these means, in the days of the factory's prosperity, case goods had been lowered to the vehicles waiting in the lane below. I understood this much instinctively.

I saw that the rusty chain was being violently agitated and peered quickly downward to discover the man we sought, lowering himself hand below hand. As I looked he released his hold, having come to the end of the chain, and dropped the short remaining distance. He picked himself up and darted around a corner out of sight just as Crampton joined me.

I was for making chase, I remember; but Crampton withheld me.

He said: "It wouldn't be any use, Mr. Murchison. He has too great a start on us. I've never used worse strategy in my life. One of us ought to have been posted below. But it's too late to think of that now. Did you get a look at his face?"

"No," I said. "He had on a hat and overcoat, and he never once looked back. As far as I could see he was about medium height and stockily built."

"Could it have been Mertz?"

I had to confess that I had never seen Mertz.

"Toad, then?"

"It could have been Toad," I said. "It was his build. In the circumstances it might have been anybody, though."

Crampton shrugged his shoulders.

"I'll get the office to put a man on to watch this place, anyhow. I don't expect it will be much use. He was up to no

good, whoever he was. He won't walk into a trap. But it's worth trying."

We went back through the manhole arrangement into the room. The first thing I noticed was that one corner of it was fitted up with a number of glass jars, retorts and test tubes, after the manner of a laboratory. There was a spirit lamp and a glass retort; in a sink under a tap was a small iron crucible.

I looked at the jars. Most of them were empty, but one or two contained liquid. One was labeled *Aqua Fortis*; a second *Aqua Regia*; a third *Nitrate of Silver*. The names meant nothing to me.

From Professor Branden I learned later that the first was the nitric acid of the shops, a powerful oxidizing agent, dissolving most of the metals after oxidizing them. In the anhydrous state it is in the form of six-sided prisms which become very hot in water and dissolve without disengaging any gas.

Aqua regia, Branden said, was named so by the old alchemists, because it had the property of dissolving gold and platinum. In chemistry it was a compound of nitric and muriatic acids. Nitrate of silver was a compound of nitric acid and oxide of silver, and a substance of great importance in photography.

Branden, as I have already stated, from the first suspected the presence of nitrate of silver in Satanoil, because of the extraordinary photogenic properties of this damnable amber fluid.

So far as Crampton and I were concerned, these were just some kind of acids. We left them severely alone.

The crucible was empty and quite dry. We found nothing of which we made any consequence, except what appeared to be a small yellow marble, which rolled from beneath a wad of cotton waste as Crampton lifted it.

WE EXAMINED it in turn. It was made of some substance resembling celluloid, but more nearly approaching a tough papiermaché. When it was held to the light there appeared to be a liquid within. If so, it was of a thick and oily consistency, for no amount of shaking produced the feel of liquid.

Crampton dropped the yellow marble into his pocket.

He said: "I'll have a look at it when I get home. It will be something to amuse Mary with."

I suggested that it would be safer, perhaps, to take the marble to Professor Branden. Crampton, however, declared that the thing was of slight importance.

"There's nothing inside it. It's probably what it looks to be—a composition marble. They stick them in kettles, you know, to keep the bottom from rusting. Anyhow, if I think different on looking it over, I'll run it along to Branden."

After all, the thing was only a yellow marble. I made sure of this. I asked Crampton to let me see it once more. I held it again to the light and satisfied myself that what we had at first supposed to be a liquid inside was nothing more than a property of transparency which reflected the light and shade.

It showed, I thought, how jumpy my mind was, that a mere marble, discovered upon premises which might conceivably have been occupied by Toad, could induce in me such caution.

To show my conversion to common sense, I knuckled the marble as in the days of my youthful schooling and made quite a creditable shot—with the glass bulb of a broken thermometer for taw.

I said: "I'll come out and help your Mary play with it, one of these days. I used to be good . . ."

There seemed little more we could do that day. It was getting late in the afternoon, and Crampton had promised to be home in good time that evening. We agreed that I should let Sir Hector Corrilees know of the empty factory, so that a man could be detailed to watch it, if that was thought necessary.

Crampton said, at parting: "Well, Mr. Murchison, better luck next time. We've six days left for this job. I've thought over what you said about the possibility that your man, Mertz, is Toad. I think it unlikely. As for the chap we scared in the old factory, there's nothing to show who he was. I'll be in tomorrow, and we'll go over the ground a second time, if you like."

We shook hands.

I never saw Crampton again.

I went straight to Russell Street and managed to persuade the commissioner's

orderly to take my name to Sir Hector. When I entered his room I saw that Professor Branden was there.

I related briefly the events of the day, to the place where the occupant of the factory had made his escape. Sir Hector seemed, I thought, a little impatient.

"You should have taken the man on the beat with you. Not that I think the thing has any bearing on Toad. In fact, it seems to me to have been rather a waste of time."

Making full allowance for the burden of his responsibility, I thought this was unjust.

I said: "You haven't heard the whole of the story."

I then went on to relate what followed. When I spoke of the laboratory paraphernalia Branden's haggard face lit interestedly.

"Indeed!" he exclaimed. "That is certainly significant. What do you say, Sir Hector?"

But the chief commissioner's disgruntled mood continued.

"Probably some patent medicine chemist trying to evade the factory laws. We'll trace him, if we can. Just as well to make sure. Anything else, Murchison?"

I was rising to take my leave, when I remembered the yellow marble. I felt ashamed to mention such a trivial thing: but I can never be too thankful now that I did.

I said: "Nothing. By the way, there was a sort of yellow marble thing . . . Crampton took it home to give to his little granddaughter."

"What!" Branden exclaimed.

He literally sprang from his chair.

"What did you say? A yellow marble?" His eyes were snapping with excitement. "A yellow marble, Murchison?"

"It looked like one," I replied.

Branden said: "Good Lord! We must find Crampton at once. At once! Where are your senses, Murchison?"

"Why?" I asked, staring, no doubt, like the fool I was.

Branden threw his hands into the air. He said incredulously: "Were you blind last night? You, too, Sir Hector?"

"I'm darned if I know what you're driving at," Sir Hector said, sharing my astonishment.

The professor appeared to catch at his self-control. He took his hat from the table with trembling hands.

"It was a yellow marble that Toad dropped into the basin of water last night," he said, almost in a whisper.

CHAPTER 13

The Flame Descends

IN RESPONSE to Sir Hector's ring, his orderly was already in the room.

"My car, Green. Tell them to be snappy. You'd better come, too Murchison. We may need you. It's the curse of this affair that it has to be kept secret. No: I'll drive myself, Green."

We tore along Flemington Road, and thence into Maribyrnong Road. In Maribyrnong Road we turned and twisted through side streets until I caught sight of the river somewhere in the vicinity of the Power Magazine.

I had scarcely identified the locality when Branden suddenly pointed: "That's Crampton's house on fire."

Sir Hector, hunched at the wheel, increased our speed.

There had, I fondly imagined, been an ordinary outbreak of fire. But it came to me suddenly that there was something unusual in the appearance of the smoke from the burning building. It clung together in the form of a cone, whose base was flattened upon the house. It remained thus, neither dispelling nor breaking its contour. In the rays of the setting sun it took on a kind of transparency, reminding me somehow of green glass. Across and through this glazed surface there shot long filaments of brilliant orange flame.

The fire engine was drawn up on the river bank and firemen were running a hose line to the river. Here and there stood an odd spectator, while others hastened to the scene across the open paddocks. In the foreground, as we came to a stop with rasping brakes, a little girl screamed and sobbed in the agitated arms of an elderly woman.

The connection had been made with the hose. Presently a jet of river water hurled itself at the conflagration. I saw the two hosemen brace themselves against the

powerful current of it, their hands locked about the nozzle.

And then . . . How shall I hope to describe what followed? Then, of a sudden, the silver line of darting water turned to a shining green. From the nozzle of the hose rose a spray of mist—steam—I don't know what.

From the hosemen came cries of agony. The hose fell to the ground, where it writhed like a great snake, vomiting not water, but a flame of green fire.

I can still hear Professor Branden's warning shout as he ran gesticulating toward the fire engine.

"Stop that pump. Stop that pump. Cut off the water!"

Sir Hector Corrilees, standing at my side, said hoarsely: "Did you see that? Did you see that, Murchison? The flame ran back along the water . . ."

The fireman at the pump had acted promptly, in response to Branden's terrified entreaty. The green flame ceased to gush from the nozzle. It was withdrawn like a tongue, into the cavern of the burning building.

A medley of excited voices immediately arose, mingled with the groans of the injured hosemen. But on the heels of it came a shrill cry from Branden. He beckoned furiously, calling us by name.

"Corrilees—Murchison—For God's sake!"

I saw; and for an instant my heart seemed to stand still. The ground about the hose, the hose itself, was curling in a green, metallic flame. Wherever water trickled, the green flame followed. In a score of places it moved over the bank toward the river itself.

Sir Hector came to action with a roar.

"Tear that hose out of the river. You men there—turn back those gutters! Keep them from the river, on your lives!"

The officer in charge, who fortunately knew Sir Hector, repeated the order sharply. I saw men clutch at the hose with scaling-hooks, as I myself raced for a green line just disappearing over the brow of the bank.

Branden bellowed at me: "Don't touch it. Kick up an earthbreak with your heels . . . burn itself out."

The next few minutes saw a nightmare activity. Twice I stayed a green line by

a miracle, even as it poised to fall into the river. Once I narrowly escaped falling headlong into the flame itself.

I came from a stupor of reaction to find Sir Hector before me. He was shaking like a man with chills.

He said: "We did it. We did it. Are you all right, Murchison? It never touched you?"

"No," I answered. "Supposing it had?"

"I don't know," he said, "but the risk was there. Remember Gregory."

I asked: "How about the horsemen?"

"The flame itself never touched them," he replied. "The metal of the nozzle turned white hot all at once. It was that that burned them. The flesh is gone from their hands, seared to the bone."

Branden said shakily: "I've been trying to explain to Mr. Petersen, here, what I think must have happened. Crampton must have stored oil on the premises. Yes, that was it. A chemical oil. I think he once mentioned as much to you, Murchison—remember?"

His look cautioned, implored.

"He said something about it this afternoon," I answered, lying valiantly. "He was a bit of a chemist, in an amateur way. He thought he had found a new spraying oil . . . orchard pests . . ."

An impossible story enough, but I could find nothing better on the spur of the moment.

Peterson said: "Well, it must have been something of the kind. I thought I knew something about fire, but I never in my life saw anything like this. Oil? What kind of oil? I could have sworn that the water itself was in flame. But, of course, that's so darn impossible that—"

He broke off abruptly with a shrug of his shoulders.

"The stuff ran on top of the water," Sir Hector said.

I saw unbelief in Peterson's eyes. But he could find no saner explanation himself.

"Well," he said, "it was the strangest experience. I'd better put that in my report. About the oil, I mean. Anyway, the house is finished. We daren't turn the water on, after a thing like that."

For the first time I turned to look at Crampton's home. It had vanished completely. The ground was swept as bare

as the palm of my hand. Not a joist or beam remained. Even the iron of the roof was gone. All that remained was the thin green haze which was characteristic of the aftermath of Satanoil.

I said: "What a dreadful blow for poor Crampton! His wife, too. Where is Crampton, by the way?"

Branden looked at me queerly.

"Murchison, I thought you knew. Both Crampton and his wife were in the house. The only one who escaped was their little granddaughter."

I have often wondered what Toad's thoughts were, when he read—as no doubt he did—in the papers next day, of the awful fate which befell the Cramptons.

No public mention was made of the yellow marble. Mary Jonas, in the first delirium of her terror, had gabbled incessantly of a yellow marble. On this particular she was ignored entirely by both the police and the reporters. Obviously, there could be no connection between such a holocaust and a yellow marble. It was regarded as merely the outcry of a disordered child mind.

And so people were left to guess, if they had interest enough, at the cause of the outbreak. Peterson's report adopted the theory that there had been a chemical oil in bulk on the premises. The point was seized upon by the papers as explaining the unusual incidents which marked the operations of the firemen and the extraordinarily complete burning.

It was agreed that Crampton had somehow ignited the chemical oil, the fumes of which had overcome him and his wife. This was gravely recorded at the coroner's inquest also, following the usual procedure.

THE evidence of Mary Jonas was admitted more or less with reservations. The official mind made kindly allowance for her tender years and excited condition. Poor little thing, it thought, it was small wonder that her whispered story was incoherent.

But we who heard that story in full, in circumstances full of gentle sympathy and encouragement, and attuned to the sensitiveness of a frightened and lonely child, arrived at the verdict of truth.

Professor Branden had taken Mary

Jonas home to his wife on the night of her grandparents' death. They had no children of their own, and Mrs. Branden welcomed her with open arms.

Not until the child had recovered from the shock of her experiences was any attempt made to probe her allusions to the yellow marble. There came an evening toward the end of our seven days of armistice, when Professor Branden invited Framling and me to his home in the University grounds. On arrival we found Sir Hector Corrilees and Hermann already there. The premier was unable to be present. The facts, had, however, been communicated to him.

Branden and his wife had that morning coaxed Mary to tell her story. Branden made rough notes, and later worked them up. I give them as he read them to us at the time—alternately in the first and third persons, as seemed best for him to record during the light and shade of Mary's account.

She was, then, playing in the garden when Crampton returned home. She ran to meet him: they entered the house together, she clinging to his arm, as her habit was.

Crampton pottered about for a while and then apparently remembered the yellow marble. According to Mary:

"Grandpa said he had a surprise for me. It was a lovely marble thing. We held it up to the light, and it looked as if it was full of smoke inside it. I had fun holding it against the lamp in the kitchen. It was yellow on the outside, but when I looked at it very hard it seemed to be green."

She asked her grandfather where he had obtained the marble. Crampton—making play, I suppose—told her solemnly that it was a fairy marble found under a toadstool by a cross-eyed, lefthanded old woman. This play on Toad was probably quite unconscious. He had wanted merely to mystify Mary. And in this he succeeded.

"I asked Grandma if fairies played marbles, but she only smiled. I think Grandpa was teasing me. He said that only boys played marbles, anyhow, so the yellow marble wasn't any use to me. He said to give it back to him.

"But I didn't, because I thought it was

a game we were having. Grandma had gone out of the kitchen, and I ran round the table, holding the marble. I teased Grandpa back. I said that if it was a fairy marble I expected it would vanish suddenly. And then I pretended that it had vanished.

Crampton, it seemed, pursued the child around the kitchen in an attempt to recover the marble. He was half in jest and half in earnest. She was a nimble little thing, and succeeded in evading him for quite a time.

Finally he caught her. Just as he did so, she threw the marble laughingly from her. Crampton spun around to get it, but his sight was not quick enough.

The yellow marble fell—as Mary could have told him—into the big tin pan of water in which her grandmother had been washing the vegetables.

And then, just when the child was opening her mouth to tell him, the tragedy happened.

"A big green flame came out of the dish. Oh, it was dreadful. It went all over Grandpa, and he cried out. He went all on fire . . ."

Mrs. Crampton, hearing the cries, came running into the kitchen. After the first shock, she did what most persons so situated would have done. A kerosene tin of water stood at the side of the kitchen sink. She lifted this and threw the contents over her husband.

The frightful result can be imagined.

"All the kitchen became full of green flames. The heat" (Mary was standing by the door) "burned my face and hurt my eyes. Grandma screamed and fell down. I think she fainted."

The terrified child rushed outdoors in a state bordering on frenzy. She had no clear idea of what happened, except that she knew her grandparents were being burned up. She saw an elderly woman passing along the track beyond the gate, and she ran to her, crying.

The woman caught her and tried to soothe her. A boy on a bicycle saw the smoke from the house and rode on and broke a fire alarm.

Mary's story practically ended at this point. Ended in a double sense; for she began to sob and moan in Mrs. Branden's arms, and Branden had abruptly ceased

his questioning. He had established the identity of the yellow marble.

CHAPTER 14

Two Days to Go

THE Crampton tragedy occurred on Tuesday night. On Wednesday, Professor Branden, Hermann, and I visited the old factory where the yellow marble had been found.

Some one had been before us. The crude laboratory apparatus was gone. The upstairs room was quite empty now, except for odds and ends which were of no use in our investigations. Not only had the various articles been removed, but the bench and sink—in places even parts of the wall—had been thoroughly washed down and cleaned.

He looked disappointed. Indeed, I know he was badly discouraged by the absence of anything from which he might have got a hint as to the nature of Toad's diabolical alchemy.

"I thought there might have been a charcoal oven or a brazier. Well, it can't be helped."

"Wonder why he cleaned up so thoroughly," Hermann said.

Branden snapped impatiently: "I wish the rest were as clear. Of course he cleaned up so that we shouldn't have even a trace on which to base an analysis. Trust his cunning for that. If we had only had the sense to put a man on guard last night, we should know by now a lot more than we do. Crampton's shocking affair drove everything else from our heads."

Nothing was to be gained by staying any longer, and so we returned to town and went our separate ways. Hermann was more worried than I had seen him.

He said, on parting: "In any other circumstances, I would have Toad inside a week. I would put on a dozen men, if need be, to trace him down. But I daren't do it. They would be working in the dark and a false move might bring about the very thing we are fighting to prevent."

Professor Branden said, "Have you thought about the Toad's confederate, Hermann? Or confederates? Can we trace them?"

"Not now," the detective said gloomily,

as he turned to swing aboard a street car. "If we landed them now, he would only get others. The thing to do is to get Toad himself."

This view eased my conscience as to Nancy's father. I was a little worried over my suppression of the facts about Rufus Carlisle; yet I thought, after all, I could put my hand on the old man whenever he was wanted.

And there was Nancy to consider. As it was, she was very unhappy; every minute of the day the poor girl expected his identification as the disturber of the Cathedral service. She lived in dread.

At lunch she unburdened herself to this effect. Her father had gone out early in the morning and had not returned, although it was long past his usual hour.

Nancy said: "He was so strange this morning, Maurice. So gentle and vague. And yet, in other respects, more responsible than I remember him for years. Actually he came back twice over to kiss me, when he was going. Almost as if he were really saying goodbye. You don't think his poor mind was contemplating anything foolish, do you?"

Her brown eyes were full of tears, as she looked at me. I hastened to reassure her.

"Of course not," I said. "Very likely he's having a little doze in the gardens. It's such a warm, comfortable day that almost anyone would yield to it."

"Suppose they find out that it was father who made the upset at St. Paul's?"

"They won't," I said.

I left her a little cheered. But toward five o'clock she telephoned me at the Treasury. I knew from her voice that she was crying.

"Maurice, he hasn't come home yet. He's never done this before—never. What can we do?"

I admit I was far from easy myself at this news. But as yet I had no theory. I said that I would come at once, and we would talk it over.

George Framling was at my elbow as I talked. The gist of what I said was apparently quite plain; for, as I hung up the receiver, he said: "I don't want to butt in, Maurice, but is anything wrong? It's something to do with old Carlisle, isn't it? You know Mona and I are very fond

of Nancy. If we can help you two at any time..."

"Old Carlisle," I said, "went out as usual this morning, but so far has failed to return. Always before he had been home regularly at twelve o'clock. I mean, since he has given up his eleven o'clock prayer meeting in the sitting room. For some weeks now he has gone out fairly early in the morning and returned at noon. The whole of his conduct has altered, in fact."

"This is probably only another phase of it," Framling said. "There's no denying, you know, that the poor chap is mad as they make them."

"By the way, the premier returns to duty tomorrow. I saw him at his home this morning. He's much better, but far from well. The deaths of Crampton and his wife shocked him very greatly. He says he has been out of the ring too long, and it's time to put the gloves on in earnest."

"I can't see what he can do that we haven't done, or are doing. Anyway, we have four days left out of the seven. And who knows but what Hermann may land Toad before the truce runs out."

He said it without conviction.

NANCY was calm again when I found her. She said merely: "I ought not to have worried you. Because, you know, it's quite plain what has happened."

I said, "You think someone has connected him with the Cathedral affair and had him picked up?"

"What else can I think? How can we find out?"

I said: "I'll go out and telephone the police—and the Receiving Home. If that has happened, they're bound to know of it."

I did so. To my relief nothing was known of Rufus Carlisle. No one answering to his description had been encountered. As I was about to leave the telephone booth a new fear came. I rang the hospitals in turn. But here, too, I was speedily reassured. Not illness; not accident.

I spoke just now of a new fear. By this I meant not the death, itself, of Rufus Carlisle, but the possible significance of that death. Rufus Carlisle was our sole

connecting link with Toad; if that link were lost our position would become incalculably worse.

I determined now that should the old man be still absent when morning came, I would confide the whole of my suspicions concerning him to George Framling. If Framling thought it advisable, I would speak to Sir Hector Corrilees or Hermann. The time had come when even I might no longer shield the girl I loved from this hurt.

Nancy gave me a wistful smile on receipt of my news.

There was another possibility of which she fortunately had no conception. Following the old man's outbreak in the Cathedral, Toad had become alarmed. Possibly he feared—as Nancy did—that Rufus Carlisle would be traced and put under restraint. He therefore had coaxed or threatened Carlisle into a place of hiding. The more I thought about this theory, the more surely I approved it.

We agreed to avoid the subject for the rest of the evening and await events. If her father had not returned by morning, I was to notify police, so that search could be undertaken.

We were sitting quietly in the front room, when a car drew up at the gate. The shrill accusing tones of Miss Mollie Hollidew reached us faintly. She was, it appeared, berating the unfortunate Cuthbert for some reason or other. Mollie and comedy were never far apart, even in her most dramatic moments, and I saw a faint smile on Nancy's lips.

She said: "Poor Cuthbert."

The entry of Miss Hollidew into the hall was occasioned with violence. I looked at the clock and saw that it was within a minute of eight. I thought: No wonder she's in a tantrum. She'll be late for the theater. Cuthbert must have overlooked the time.

I expected to hear her flying up the stairs to her room. Instead, she precipitated herself into the sitting room, looked at us with a faint scream, and collapsed upon the sofa.

Nancy, womanlike, was instantly all concern. She went to Mollie and said: "Good heavens! Are you ill, dear?"

Mollie continued to moan.

At this juncture Mr. Weinseidle en-

tered. He wore a hangdog expression. I asked: "Is she ill?"

He stammered: "Undoubtedly."

His eyes seemed to beckon and I stepped close to him. He muttered hoarsely in my ear: "She got fired at the theater. Talked back to the producer, or something. My gosh! Have I had a rotten time? I ask you. Undoubtedly."

He fell into a chair, and I gave him a cigarette. His attempt to smoke it was pathetic. Twice it fell on the carpet, and once he put the lighted end in his mouth.

In the meantime, Nancy brought a glass of water.

She said innocently: "Shall I get Cuthbert to ring the theater and tell them you're too ill to attend?"

This brought Miss Hollidew to a sitting position. She flung her fringe from her brow with a tragic hand and laughed.

"Don't bother. They know perfectly well that I'll not be there, tonight or any other night. I may as well tell you that I've resigned. If the firm thinks it owns Mollie Hollidew, it has another guess coming."

"Too bad," Nancy sympathized.

MISS HOLLIDEW stared at her. I thought for a moment that she was going to brazen it out absurdly. But all at once her lip dropped. The ill humor and defiance fled from her, and she cast herself on Nancy's neck with a wail.

"What am I going to do? Oh, what am I going to do?"

I heard a voice—an alien voice, filled with both purpose and appeal—at my back.

"Marry me," it said.

I turned to see Mr. Weinseidle standing with purple face and clenched hands. Somehow all his vacuity and vanished. There was even a certain nobility in the poise of his head, the determination of his look. He was a man transformed.

Mollie Hollidew emitted a sound that was half sob and half a giggle.

She said: "What do you know about that? Marry you!"

"Undoubtedly," said the old Cuthbert. The new Cuthbert added almost ferociously: "Yes, you confounded little fool."

The shock of this rendered Miss Hollidew momentarily speechless.

"My art—" she began.

"Curse your art!" said Cuthbert. "It's time this nonsense stopped. I'm glad they tipped you out of the theater, for there's no excuse now for any more backing and filling."

Miss Hollidew, bolt upright, said faintly, "Cuthbert! Have you been drinking? Why, my goodness, I never even imagined such a thing. I must have time to think about it."

"Tomorrow," Cuthbert said, in his amazing role of cave man, "I'll get a license. Drink! No I haven't been drinking. But I shall probably get drunk as soon as we're married. Undoubtedly."

As he advanced amorously upon Miss Hollidew, Nancy slipped to my side. By common consent we found ourselves presently in the kitchen, where our laughter exploded simultaneously.

I said: "Something's happened to Cuthbert."

"Astounding," Nancy said. "I'm awfully glad he's taken Mollie in hand at last. I never thought he had it in him. She was so surprised that she nearly fell off the sofa. They'll be perfectly happy together when they are married."

I tried to think, as I lay in bed, what ought to be done in the morning. I knew, I was as certain as I could be, that Rufus Carlisle still lived. Toad had made him prisoner...

At breakfast, Nancy said: "You see I was right, Maurice. Now what shall we do?"

"We must get the police to search for him," I said.

At the first opportunity, on reaching the premier's office, I drew Framling aside and confided my fear. I thought his face paled a little.

"The only thing to do is to tell the others," he said, after thinking silently for some moments. "If you're right, Maurice, it's hard for Nancy."

"We've got to keep it from her," I said.

Framling shrugged his shoulders and went to the telephone to call Hermann to the Treasury. By luck the detective had not left his office. He promised to come immediately.

"Hermann will know what to do," Framling said.

Presently the detective arrived. Framling smuggled us very unobtrusively into the premier's room. Mr. Hannaford greeted us with a worried smile.

He said: "What is it? If you wish me to send for this man Toad, I will not do it. I refuse absolutely to treat with him. He dare not carry out his threat to destroy the world. I tell you, he dare not. . . ."

"It's not that, exactly, sir," Framling explained. "Murchison here has a theory as to Toad's confederate. We thought you ought to be told."

I told briefly what I knew of Rufus Carlisle, making it appear that my suspicions had been aroused only following his disappearance. I did not refer to the Cathedral sensation, but Hermann seized on it instantly.

He said: "It was Carlisle beyond doubt, then, who declaimed the other Sunday during the service at St. Paul's. You remember the incident, sir?"

"I heard of it," the premier said. He looked at me very earnestly. "Was it Carlisle, do you think, Murchison?"

There was no help for it.

"Yes," I answered, "I am afraid it was."

George Framling, with a little apologetic glance at me, said: "Murchison is engaged to Carlisle's daughter, sir."

A KINDLY interest came to Mr. Hannaford's tired face. His sudden smile was singularly sweet and understanding—a true index of the greathearted man that he was.

"Indeed. I can well believe how distressed both of you must be. Will you tell Miss Carlisle from me that every consideration will be shown her father, should we discover him for her. Of course, she knows nothing of his association with this foul creature."

As we rose to go, Hermann said stolidly: "The seven days will be up on Sunday night, sir. Tomorrow is Saturday. If you intend to communicate with Toad in any way, through the newspapers, it will have to be done at once, sir, or it will be too late."

The white of the premier's thin cheek suddenly yielded to an angry red.

"I will not treat with so vile a man. Let him do his worst I look to you, Her-

mann, to see that that worst is ineffectual. He must be found and arrested: Is one man to set at naught every rule of civilized conduct? What are you police doing? Are you impotent?"

Before this unexpected outburst Hermann's farmer-like face grew stiff and gray. He said, with hurt dignity: "You forget, Mr. Hannaford, that your own order forbids the aid of the police force as a whole. Now that Crampton is gone, I am practically alone."

"Forgive me," the premier said. He bowed his head once more, and his hand made a gesture infinitely weary and self-accusing. "You are quite right, Hermann, I am—not very well, I think. Do your best. We must all work and hope. And God be with the rest."

To Hermann's everlasting credit there was not bitterness in his voice when he spoke to Framling and me in the corridor.

"And just think of the effect on the people themselves. There'd be a revolution before you could wink your eye. No; the premier's a brave and wise man."

. . . Now that Mollie Hollidew was no longer working, Nancy had company at least for a night. When, therefore, George Framling asked me to his flat to talk things over, I had no compunction about going.

Mollie, it transpired, although she had capitulated to the idea of becoming Mrs. Cuthbert Weinseidle, had her own ideas as to when this desirable end should be attained. She had fixed the marriage for the week before Christmas—that is to say, two weeks ahead, for we were now in December. Nancy and I were enlisted as bridesmaid and best man, respectively.

For Nancy's sake, I am glad of the diversion afforded. Despite the uncertainty of her father's fate, she was able to enter into the spirit of the occasion with tolerable enthusiasm.

Mona went early to bed, and Framling and I talked to a late hour. I am bound to say, however, without much comfort. Midway in the evening Framling got his radio going. And curiously enough, almost the first item of broadcasting we heard was applicable to our problem.

"The Russell Street police have asked the whereabouts of Rufus Carlisle—

C-a-r-l-i-s-l-e—last seen leaving his home at Number 5, Monray Street, East Melbourne, at nine o'clock yesterday morning, please communicate with the nearest police station, or with Miss Carlisle at that address at once."

There followed then a brief description of the old man, which Nancy herself had supplied to Hermann.

"It's a rotten business, altogether," Framling said.

He shivered slightly and pulled hard at his pipe.

He said: "I wish the girls were out of it, Maurice. A man doesn't mind for himself, but when one thinks of women and children. . . ."

"Courage," I said. And we shook hands good night.

CHAPTER 15

Stop for a Cop!

NOW that the crisis of my story looms, I find my thoughts growing a little breathless and out of step. The sequence of events is a twisted thread running through the pattern of those days of dread, and the task of straightening it is difficult.

I have at my elbow as I write the newspapers of the period, with their screaming headlines and hysterical punctuation. What a front-page story Toad must have made, if such a riot of print could follow one movement only of his hidden hand.

If the press had known the facts behind the news, it would have bawled itself and its readers into the mad-house. Most fortunately, it was so occupied with theory and description that there was never any danger of its discovering the fact and circumstance.

. . . On Monday morning, I encountered in the city Sir Hector Corrilees and Professor Branden. The two were walking slowly down the block, talking earnestly. On seeing me, Branden said: "If you care to join us in a cup of coffee, Murchison, I have some data in regard to Satanoil which will interest you."

I accepted eagerly, and presently, we were seated in a quiet cafe corner.

"Well," Sir Hector said, as the waitress withdrew with our order, "the armistice

is over. We shall see now what Toad's threat amounts to. Nervous, Murchison?"

I said: "To be frank, I am nervous. Mighty nervous. I suppose there is no news of Rufus Carlisle?"

"No, but I expect to find him within a few more hours. I have thirty men searching."

"Suppose," Branden said slowly, "they find Carlisle. In view of their ignorance of the real significance of events, isn't there a risk that disaster may follow—accidentally?"

Sir Hector frowned.

"We have to chance that. The orders are strict. If found, Carlisle is to be taken directly to my office. A keen eye is to be kept on all his movements, but he is not to be searched or interfered with in any way. Above all, he is not to be allowed access to any water supply. Hermann and I will take him in hand, as soon as notified."

He frowned, and added: "If I could be sure that Carlisle, and Carlisle alone, was Toad's confederate—"

He left the sentence unfinished, and turned abruptly to the professor.

"You were going to tell us something about Satanoil?"

Branden nodded.

"Little enough, Sir Hector, but not altogether insignificant, I think. I have collected quite a lot of evidence from various people who figured in the burning of Crampton's house. And a conclusion I have reached is that Satanoil is limited in its effect in certain directions.

"For example, the heat it generates will disintegrate metal but not stone. The galvanized iron of Crampton's house was utterly consumed, but the stone foundation of the porch was unharmed.

"In Gregory's case not a vestige was left. Even his watch was dissolved and burned. The sole evidence that he had been there a moment before was found in his walking stick, which he had left on the bench where Murchison was sitting at the time.

"The most interesting point, however, is the apparent limitation of what I may call the ignition radius of Satanoil. What distance separated you from Gregory, Murchison?"

Both men turned to me.

I replied: "About a dozen feet, I should say."

Branden sipped his coffee, and continued: "You felt heat, but not to an uncomfortable degree. Exactly. I thought so. And your experience coincides with that of Framling, who was even nearer. It would seem, then, that the ignition radius is not in direct proportion to the bulk of the flame, but to its height.

"In the case of Crampton, the furthest point at which the heat ignited the grass was about fifty feet. The flame was cone-shaped and very restricted. Its apex was never higher than twelve or fifteen feet above the ridge of the house. Did you happen to notice the condition of the atmosphere, by the way?"

"You mean its humidity?" Sir Hector asked.

"Yes."

"It was particularly dry," I said.

"And on the evening Gregory was destroyed?" Branden prompted.

"It was fairly moist," I said. "It rained a couple of hours later."

"Just so," Branden nodded. "Now do you see the connection? The moister the air the higher—and therefore the greater ignition radius of—the flame of Satanoil. There is also an exhaustion point where the green flame of Satanoil turns to the red flame of ordinary fire. There is, in short, a point where Satanoil, if no longer fed by water, returns to itself and is self-extinguished."

HE LOOKED at us queerly in turn.

"By God's mercy, gentlemen, no rain has fallen on either occasion when the flame of Satanoil was alive."

"What!" Sir Hector exclaimed.

His jaw seemed to sag. He burst out incredulously: "You don't mean to say—Rubbish, Branden. Impossible!"

"Is it?" Branden said, "Is it? Is Satanoil impossible? . . . Well, perhaps you're right. But I hope I never live to see it put to the proof."

I was conscious of a sick feeling at the pit of my stomach.

I said: "You don't surely mean that hellfire would run over the rain-wet earth?"

"The earth!" Branden jeered. Actually, I believe, his scientific fervor approved

the horror he pictured for us now. "The earth! Say rather the sky. Have you ever seen fire run up a curtain, Murchison? Then imagine a fire that climbed sheets of rain to ignite the clouds themselves. . . ."

"Stop!" Sir Hector cried hoarsely.

But Branden had already ceased. The reaction of his own fear was upon him, and he hid his face in his hands. The three of us sat as if turned to stone by the sheer desperation of the moment.

All about us flowed the life of the city; all those pleasant and intimate evidences of human progress and companionship. And here at our elbow the grisly spectre of annihilation. . . .

In the black chasm of my thought rose the vision of a world utterly consumed by Satan! The substance gone, the shadow only remaining. Photographed on time and eternity; a ghastly phantom world rolling on through space. . . .

I was recalled by Branden's voice.

He said: "Reserved by fire unto the Day of Judgment! The pavement prophets—how little they realize the truth concealed in their cranky ravings. I heard an old fellow last night—mad, of course. And yet saner than the sanest of us. Full of warnings. . . ."

Sir Hector said sharply: "What? What was that? Where was this? What sort of a man?"

"Why, I don't remember precisely," Branden said. He looked his astonishment. "The usual type that scribble on walls and footpaths. An old fellow"

I recalled that Branden knew nothing of our suspicions concerning Rufus Carlisle. He had never seen Rufus Carlisle, so far as I knew. Probably had never even heard of him.

I said: "Was he in a suit of rusty black? A thin face and scanty white hair? A high, thin voice?"

"That's the man," Branden said.

"But where? Where was he?" Sir Hector pressed excitedly. "Think Branden. Think!"

"No," the professor said, after a moment. "I can't place where it was. I was around a good deal in the evening. Some place in Carlton. But I was at the dispensary in Abbotsford, and then I went to Newmarket. No, I can't recall where it was."

Sir Hector, restraining his impatience and disappointment, told him of Rufus Carlisle.

He said: "Now you can see the significance, Branden. Call on your wits, my dear fellow. Can't you give us some kind of a clue?"

Branden, looking very downcast, repeated that for the moment, at least, his mind was fogged.

"I'll do my best to remember, Corrilees. I'll communicate instantly with you in that case. Drummond Street. . . . No, it wasn't there. Well, I'll do my best. If only you had told me earlier. . . ."

With this we had to be content.

The rest of the day passed without incident. Tuesday came and went. Wednesday. . . . And still no sign of Toad.

And then. . . . Wednesday night. We had said in our hearts, "Toad will not dare." How little our vision proved.

At tea on Wednesday evening Mollie Hollidew suggested that Nancy and I go for a run to the hills with her when Cuthbert came with his car.

"Listen," said Miss Hollidew, "I'll go out and phone Cuthbert right away. The night's like an oven."

She borrowed two pennies from me to work the public telephone with, and sailed into the street. I helped Nancy clear away, and then she went to tidy herself for the drive.

Mollie Hollidew returned presently with the news that Cuthbert was already on his way.

In a little while Cuthbert glided in at the curb. He was driving a convertible with the top down. We could get what breeze our going made, at all events.

I said, "It's very decent of you to take us along with you and Mollie, Mr. Weinsiedle."

"Undout—Not at all," he said. "By the way, shall we spill the mister? Sure. Well, where'd you like to run to, Maurice?"

"Anywhere," Nancy said, settling herself deliciously in the back seat.

"Murchison! Hold it!"

I was just getting in the car when I caught sight of the man running furiously toward us. I recognized him even as he shouted my name. It was Detective Hermann.

CHAPTER 16

Hell on Earth

IT SEEMED scarcely a second later that he was plumped down on the seat at my side. He was breathless with exertion, and his voice shook with suppressed excitement.

He yelled at Cuthbert: "Police job. Coupe . . . black body . . . just turned north along Clarendon Street . . . after it . . ."

To do Cuthbert justice, he wasn't in the least put out at finding himself thus harshly commandeered. He knew Hermann; as did Nancy. Mollie Hollidew, however, vented her surprise and indignation in characteristic fashion.

"Of all the cheek!" she said shrilly, as the car shot forward. "Who's the boy friend, Cuthbert?"

She glared at Hermann.

I heard Cuthbert grunt: "Chuck the chorus stuff, Mollie—there's a dear. That's Hermann the Hound. I bet we have some fun before the night's out."

As the car took the turn Hermann's mouth dropped to my ear. He muttered: "It's Toad, Murchison. I saw him climb in and drive off, but wasn't quick enough to grab him."

He sat up then, and yelled at Cuthbert: "The number is 298764. It's a fake, of course, Murchison. Wait a moment. What's that car pulling out from the service station?"

I saw it myself. It looked like a Rattray Six. But I haven't that intuitive identification of a motor car which is the wonderful and fearful prerogative of the small boy, and I couldn't be sure. It slid into the thickening gloom ahead of us.

Cuthbert called over his shoulder: "That's your car, Hermann. He must have pulled in for juice. Want me to chase him into the curb?"

Hermann grinned.

"No. Just keep him in sight. Follow him whenever he goes. Good evening, Miss Carlisle."

"What has he done?" Nancy asked acknowledging his belated salutation. She was frankly bewildered by the turn of events. "Has he stolen the car, Mr. Hermann?"

"I shouldn't be surprised," the detective said evasively. I sensed that he was casting about in his mind for a suitable deception. "No, it isn't that. I've half an idea it's a chap named Bickerson. He's wanted for forgery."

Nancy asked sensibly: "Why don't you let Cuthbert run ahead and stop him? Wouldn't it save time?"

"Well—perhaps it would," Hermann said. "The fact is, you see, we think he has a coining plant somewhere. He may take me right to it if we let him alone."

"Why, how clever of you to think of that!" Nancy said. She was thrilled by the prospects of the chase. "Don't you think so, Maurice?"

"Rather," I said.

But if this were Toad . . .

Hermann and I began to talk in a cautious undertone.

"He has someone with him in the car," Hermann said. He lowered his head a moment while he lit a cigarette. "Toad. Yes, I'll swear it's Toad. Do you know Murchison, I saw his confounded red eyes shining in the dark. There isn't another pair of eyes like that in the whole of Australia."

I wondered, with a glance at Nancy's pale oval of a face, whether Toad's companion was Rufus Carlisle. I hoped it might be; for if it was not, the plain inference was that he had more than one confederate. In that case, our task was more complex than ever.

Hermann shrugged his shoulders.

"I wish I knew . . . Who's the girl with Weinseidle?"

"That's Mollie Hollidew."

"Know anything?"

"Not a word," I said.

He said: "It was the luckiest thing, finding you all ready with a car like this. I tried to hold up a private car, and the darned fool nearly went over the top of me. I got his number, though, and I'll have him on the mat in the morning."

His tone, I thought, was worried. He stared steadily ahead at the Rattray Six, and his hands fidgeted.

He said, all at once: "I wish I knew what all this meant. Where's he heading for? If that's Toad—and I haven't a doubt of it—what's his game?"

"Where are we now?" I asked.

"This is Thomastown. We've been traveling due north the whole time. Now what the devil would Toad want up this way?"

I couldn't imagine.

I said. "Wouldn't it be safer, after all, to do as Nancy suggested? Can't we overhaul them and arrest Toad? At the worst we would only be forced to release him again if we found he had taken the usual precautions."

"No," Hermann said explosively. "So long as he doesn't know that he's being shadowed, he may give us rope enough to hang him. I may be wrong, but that's how it seems to me. He's on a mission of some kind, and a devil's one at that. If we could find out what it is . . ."

The traffic had thinned to such an extent that Cuthbert, on his own initiative, deliberately dropped further to the rear. Hermann saw the move and approved.

"That's shrewd. Of course, in a little while he'd want to know why we didn't pass him . . . We're getting into Epping now."

A moment later we turned east. At South Morang the road ran north again. By this time, I suppose, we had covered some twenty miles. The next township, Hermann informed me—if we held the present direction—was Mernda.

WE WERE, in fact, on the outskirts of Mernda when there came one of those unexpected interruptions which are known to all motorists. The Rattray Six was now a quarter of a mile in advance; the tail light was just visible. Cuthbert was holding the distance easily.

But now, from a side road, came suddenly a lumbering, horse-drawn market cart. I saw its bulk loom, and heard Mollie Hollidew's frightened squeak.

And then we swerved violently into the roadside with a grinding of brakes and a sudden, paralyzing stop. Nancy woke and clutched my arm.

The market-gardener, no doubt equally startled, came running to know what damage his idiocy had caused. Hermann waved him aside with a torrent of angry instruction.

"Get that cart off the road. Let us pass. This is a police car."

The word "police" evidently scared the man, for he scuttled obediently to his task. A second later we shot by him in a cloud of dust. But the delay had been fatal. The Rattray Six had vanished completely. Cuthbert let the car out almost to the limit. We simply tore through the night. But only a deserted road greeted our straining eyes. Toad had escaped us.

I was cursing the luck, when Hermann suddenly sprang to his feet.

"Stop her, Weinseidle, stop her! What a fool I am! Of course! the Yan Yean. Can you find the road to the Yan Yean? They must have turned off just as we met that cart."

He fell back, mopping at his face. Cuthbert turned the car, and we ran back toward the Yan Yean.

Nancy and Mollie Hollidew, their feminine perceptions aroused at last to the urgent nature of Hermann's chase, began to shrill with excitement.

Hermann shouted: "Do you know the reservoir, Weinseidle?"

"Undoubtedly," the wind brought to us.

Hermann said quickly:

"Then pull up at the big gates, and face the car back this way. The girls stay right where you are; and you in the driver's seat, Weinseidle. I can't explain. That's the cue for you three when we get there. Murchison will come out with me. Get me?"

Cuthbert nodded, and Hermann sank back at my side. He mumbled: "The swine. The unutterable beast. Faster, Weinseidle, faster. What a devil!"

Even then—but I was a stranger to Melbourne after all—I did not realize how monstrous a fear was his. I turned the name over in my mind. Yan Yean. Surely there was a familiarity about it. Where had I heard it before?

As if guessing at my thought, Hermann suddenly shouted in my ear: "Don't you see what he's at, Murchison? Don't you? He means to fire the reservoir. Melbourne's water supply—think of it!"

My flesh crept as I tried to picture what such a deed would mean. Had I known the utmost possibilities—as Hermann must have known—I would have felt an even blacker horror and despair. But I was completely ignorant of the city's great

water system. And it was just as well. Toad himself must have been equally ignorant about that. It was not his purpose at this stage to carry out his threat of world destruction. Yet when I make clear the incalculable danger to which he brought humanity this night, it would almost seem indeed that this was his intention.

Toad was undoubtedly unaware of the photogenic properties of Satanoil. He was also, I am certain, unaware of the possibility of the atmosphere igniting. And here, too, his malicious blundering narrowly escaped its possible conclusion. If Hermann had not shown the initiative that distinguished him now, the supreme catastrophe might have resulted.

Melbourne's water system involved the Wallaby Creek, Plenty and Yan Yean watersheds. The Silver Creek water led into the Silver Aqueduct, which joined the Wallaby Aqueduct, thence connecting via cascades to Jack's Creek, the whole emptying into the Toorourrong Reservoir. The Plenty River also ran into the reservoir and out again.

A clear-water channel carried this water to the Yan Yean Reservoir, which had a capacity of some seven billion gallons. The reservoir depth was nineteen feet, with a greatest possible depth available for storage of twenty-five feet. The water covered an area of thirteen hundred acres.

So—the water held an unbroken line from the Yan Yean Reservoir, through Toorourrong and over the cascades, into creeks and rivers, into the Silver, Wallaby, Pheasant and King Parrot Creeks, and into the Plenty River. And the Plenty River into the Yarra River. And the Yarra River into the sea. Fire following this line . . .

No doubt these facts poured through Hermann's mind as the car rushed onward. I know that his face was white against the shadow, and once I heard the breath sob in his throat.

No sight or sound met us as the car halted at the gates of the reservoir. Hermann, with a muttered admonition to those who were to remain, leaped to the ground.

I RAN after Hermann, who had already pushed through the fence into the reserve. Before us, some two hundred yards

from the shore of the reservoir itself, was the ranger's house. A voice hailed us sharply.

"Who's that? What are you doing in here without a permit?"

Hermann said to the advancing patrolman: "We're from the police. No time to explain now. Is there telephone connection with Toorourrong?"

"Yes," the man said. I felt that he was eyeing us with a certain amount of doubt. "There's a line from the ranger's house, there."

Hermann said, "Good! Call your man up. Look: you know a police badge when you see one. Go for your life and tell Toorourrong to drop the gateways on the clear-water channels."

"What's wrong?" the patrolman's curiosity prompted.

"For God's sake," Hermann exclaimed, "do what I ask."

The tone of his voice was so compelling that the man turned without a word and made for the house.

Hermann said: "Murchison, I can't be wrong. I'll swear Toad meant this. Can you see anything? Hear anything?"

"No," I replied.

"We'll make the circuit of the water," the detective said. "Who's this?"

It was the ranger and the patrolman. The first showed signs of irritation.

"What's the idea?" he asked curtly.

"Did you get Toorourrong?" Hermann snapped.

"Yes. The gates are down."

Hermann said: "Can you divert the outlets?"

"Yes. By valves and by-washes. Look here—"

"Do it," Hermann commanded. "Get your family out of that house and over here on the bank. If I'm wrong, I'm wrong. But the risk's too great to play with."

"Risk!" the ranger exclaimed incredulously. I am sure at that moment he thought he had to do with a lunatic. "Risk of what? Risk of what?"

I could contain my suspense no longer.

"Death!" I heard myself cry. "Death."

Even now, when I close my eyes, the scene returns sharply, as if etched within their lids. I live again, for a shattering second, the enormity of that fear. I see

the bulky shadow of Hermann, and the blurred silhouettes of the ranger and patrolman, crouching against the background of the night sky. I see the faint mirror of the water in the reservoir, quiet and dark and star-strewn. And, framed in the open, lighted doorway of the house, the ranger's wife and young daughter. A vision soft, idyllic . . .

Then this: A tube of blue-green rising like a water-spout from the farther edge of the reservoir, thickening as it lifted. A widening blaze like the coming of a midnight sun; heat crackling upon the air, as if to the crumpling of a gigantic newspaper.

And the screaming of women.

Hermann yelled: "The car! Get those women to the car!"

The Plenty Slope was illuminated with the completeness of broad daylight. The tube of flame had turned to a cone whose base was already upon half the width of the water. The heat scorched.

I was at the ranger's heels as he stooped to lift his wife from the path where she had fallen unconscious in the extremity of her terror. The girl ran screaming past me, and I caught her arm. She struggled to escape me, but I managed to retain my hold. I half dragged, half carried her across the reserve. And all at once her resistance ended. Her body went slack, and she pitched in a faint, dragging me to my knees.

As I got up, trying to lift her, I saw the bulk of the ranger's house suddenly glow. Flame sheared it like a great blade, and the two halves fell slowly apart. They seemed to settle as foam settles; to melt, rather than burn; and all at once were gone. The bush on the farther side of the reserve was alight. That on our side was smoking in a dozen places.

The patrolman appeared suddenly at my side. As we raised the girl between us he stammered: "My God! The world is on fire! Is she dead?"

I shook my head. It was not time for talking. I wanted all my breath for running. The heat seemed like a hand reaching to pluck us into the core of its burning. I felt that in another few moments we should crumple where we stood. Already the air was sapped of its virtue, so that we breathed with difficulty.

We came, after what seemed an age, to the roadside. The engine of the car was running, and Cuthbert's voice, roused for once to a pitch of open excitement, nailed us sharply.

"Where's Hermann?"

I gasped: "Isn't he here?"

Nancy's white face loomed for a moment on my dazed sight.

"Maurice! . . . I thought you were never coming. Lift that poor child in here with her mother. Oh, Maurice—What dreadful thing is happening?"

"We daren't wait much longer," Cuthbert said.

I had an impression of Mollie Hollidew twisted in her seat to stare at us. She looked, somehow, like a wax figure. Her eyes were glazed, and her mouth was still working, as if she had only that moment reached an exhaustion of screaming.

"Here they are," the patrolman said.

Hermann and the ranger, beating at their scorching clothes came tumbling into our midst. Hermann said huskily, as he climbed into the car: "Managed—turn pipes—off. Thought it safer."

I turned to look behind us as we gathered way. Where we had stood the grass was in flame. The whole sky was alight to its zenith.

CHAPTER 17

The Terror

BUT for the sadness that comes over me, I could smile at the theorizing of the newspapers in the days that followed. They were all hopelessly at fault in their attempt to guess the origin and nature of the period which now figures in the history books as *The Three Days' Terror*.

It could hardly be otherwise. For those of us who could have told the horrible truth of that mystery held grimly to our oath of silence. We had at all costs to keep the people from the panic of realization.

For three days and nights the country to the north of the city ran red with fire. On the fourth day rain fell . . . Of this I shall speak later.

As for the rest of that night—

When we had left the reservoir reserve Cuthbert drove us from house to house—

in ever-widening circles, as the flames pursued us—while we roused the settlers to escape. The entire slope had ignited, and the ranges blazed with such monstrous magnificence that men stood aghast in the streets of Melbourne, and asked one another whether this was indeed the end of all things.

Speculation ran riot. Reporters became almost hysterical in the role of prophet.

One paper spoke of a subterranean gas explosion. A second ran a streamer in huge type, *Seismologists Confounded*. A third declared *Earth Swallows Reservoir*.

A special correspondent of one of the leading dailies put it this way:

Shortly after nine o'clock last night a tremendous explosion, thought to be of volcanic origin, completely wrecked the Yan Yean Reservoir and set fire to the surrounding country.

At the time of writing some fifty fatalities are recorded, and the death roll is steadily growing. Former disasters, such as those of Black Thursday and the holocaust of the Mount Fatigue district, are trivial by comparison with this.

The hills are now a furnace covering many square miles. Although hundreds of fire-fighters are at work, there appears to be little possibility of checking the flames without a heavy rain. Experienced bushmen assert that no fire within living memory had burned so fast and so viciously. On the site of the reservoir proper a cavity of some forty feet in depth has been burned.

In view of the unknown origin of the disaster, and the fact that the bed of the basin still emits a flame, a cordon has been drawn about the area for the protection of the ever curious. The watershed is denuded. The heat is intense.

An interview with the ranger, Henry Borrowdean, follows. He states that he cannot account for what has happened. The account proceeds:

It would appear that the first warning came from Senior-Detective Hermann, who was one of a party motoring the neighborhood of the basin. Hermann declines to comment on the cause of the disaster.

He stated, however, that certain phenomena, with which the lake districts of New Zealand had familiarized him, attracted his attention in passing. He became uneasy and returned to investigate. Encountering one of the Patrolmen, William Slambee, he instructed him to close the gateways admitting to the clear-water channel at Toorourrong Reservoir, distant some seven miles.

This was done. The reason for the request is not clear. Detective Hermann intimated that he would justify the action in his official report.

Under the circumstances it seems strange that water for fighting the fire should have been

deliberately withheld. To this fact, and to the absence of any rain, must be ascribed the extent of the fire now raging.

Had the channels from the Toorourrong basin been allowed to pour into the site of the explosion, it is probable that the outbreak would have been restricted to the reserve itself. And this in spite of the fact that the water in the Yan Yean basin seems to have been swallowed by an initial earth fissure.

No trace of such a fissure can now be seen. It is supposed that the fissure closed immediately after the water in the basin was exhausted. In that case, the water from Toorourrong could have been used against the fire.

Theories were launched the world over. One was that an earth vent released a subterranean gas which, on meeting the atmosphere, spontaneously ignited. A second theory, advanced by a well-known American savant, was to the effect that what is known as a volcanic pocket had by some means found communications with the atmosphere, resulting in a local eruption.

In all accounts the word "explosion" was used. In point of fact, no real explosion took place. One of the remarkable features of Satanoil was the comparative silence in which it destroyed. It was accompanied by a crackling and a hissing, reminding one of an electrical discharge.

BRANDEN was among the first to descend into the charred basin of the Yan Yean. In places where moisture exuded from the earth a green flame still flickered. Regardless of onlookers, Branden carried out certain hasty investigations. The most important consisted of a spectrum analysis of the flame of Satanoil. He discovered the sharply defined yellow and red lines indicative of the presence of a lithium compound. He estimated this as a little less than the millionth part of a milligram in quantity. He thought, also, that he detected traces of rubidium.

Further than this, Branden was able to declare to us that the exhaustion point of the Satanoil flame was reached at the end of the second day of burning. Had rain fallen in those two days . . .

But rain did not fall. The reporter's disappointment, I still think, was providential.

As for the fresh-water channels from the Toorourrong basin, they were charred but intact. Branden's theory as to the

resistance of stone to Satanoil most fortunately proved correct: otherwise the trickle of water remaining in the channels, after the gateways were dropped, might have led into the Toorourrong basin after all, despite Hermann's prompt action.

A thorough investigation was undertaken by the government, but to no result. A party of international geologists and seismologists, equipped by the Rockefeller Institute of America, spent some months upon the same quest. The scientific journals of the time were flooded with theory, but scarcely a fact of importance was gathered. The denuded basin was eventually restorted, and once again fills its purpose of water supply to Melbourne.

One detail was curiously missing in this case. There was no evidence of the photogenic properties of Satanoil. When the reservoir burned, some atmospheric requisite appears to have been lacking. At all events, no mirage of the horror has, so far as I am aware, been recorded.

I have myself, however, seen the phantom of Crampton's house against the skyline. The illusion is preserved to this day, and is known as The Haunted Castle on the Saltwater River.

It was on the evening of the fourth day following the Yan Yean holocaust that George Framling came to the house with the news that the premier had called a conference that night at his offices.

It was then a quarter to eight, and Framling and I set out to walk to the Treasury building. Rain was still falling gently, but the aftermath of the fire was even then noticeable in the angry hue of the northern sky.

I said: "What will Mr. Hannaford do now? What can he do? I suppose this spells defeat."

Framling nodded. When he spoke he choked a little.

"I'm afraid so. Eighty-four people have been burned to death, Melbourne has practically no water, and the destruction of livestock and property is appalling. No, we didn't understand what we were up against."

He broke out, then, cursing Toad and all his ways.

"He's inhuman, Maurice. A devil in human shape. Good Lord! He has the world at his mercy."

I could only hold to helpless silence.

The others were waiting for us. The premier looked ghastly. His flesh was chalk-white, and his body never ceased its trembling.

He said: "Well, gentlemen, we've failed. We've done our best, but we've failed. We can do no more."

"It seems so," Sir Hector Corrilees agreed.

"We don't dare risk the further malice of this monster," Hannaford said. "We're whipped, eh Murchison?"

The laugh he ventured made me shudder. To plainly he was a broken man at last. His eyes were unutterably sick.

"There's time yet," I stammered. "Surely we can do something."

He flung one thin hand at me.

"Why waste words? This is the end. Or is it? Do you know, I'm tempted to make it so. I'm tempted to call this devil's bluff and let the world go to the devil. Better get it over and done with than that men should live under the shadow of Hell. Well, Branden?"

But Branden only gave a shrug of his shoulders. He had, I think, long since finished with moral issues. The obsession which was to destroy him was already upon him, and his veins were fired only by the scientific wonder of what had happened.

Sir Hector Corrilees said: "You'll send for Toad?"

All of us followed his glance to Hannaford's white, drawn face.

"Yes," the premier replied in a dull voice. "I'll send for Toad. Framling, you'll arrange that. Say this: *I agree. Arrange meeting.* Sign it. What's the difference? Who would guess or care to guess? Sign it *Premier.*"

Framling said: "Very good, sir."

THE irony of that! Who, chancing upon the simple message in the newspapers next day, would have dreamed its mighty import? The head of the government confessing his failure to prevail against the threat of criminal lunacy. The clue to the tragedy that was bewildering the brains of science.

I went to the Treasury next day, futile though the pretence now was, merely because I could think of nothing else to do.

And I wanted to hide my telltale face from Nancy. She, poor girl, sensed the despair in my thought, and looked at me wistfully, no doubt ascribing it to concern for her own anxiety. We had heard nothing of Rufus Carlisle. I dreaded what we might hear.

At midday came a telegram addressed to the premier. I stood by Framling's elbow as he read. Laconic and peremptory:

YOUR OFFICE MIDNIGHT THIS DAY
—TOAD

George, I remember, said: "Why midnight?"

And I can hear myself saying.

"Why! Because he's dramatic. Those swines always are. They can't let acting alone. It's the right setting, you see, for the work of the devil. Evil hates the light."

Framling went to telephone the others. I took my hat and went down town. I wanted to see the happy crowds, all secure in their ignorance. I wanted to shout their folly at them; to tell them what fools they were . . .

Someone caught me by the arm, as I stood; caught hold of me and shook me.

"Murchison, has your courage caved in altogether? You look like a corpse."

"I feel like one," I said, staring back into Sir Hector's set face. "Did you know it was tonight?"

Hermann was with his chief. They both looked at me.

"What's tonight?" the detective asked.

"Tonight the world puts its neck under Toad's foot," I said. I must have shouted it, for the people passing turned to peer at us. "He sent an answer to the premier's message. We're to meet at the office at midnight. Framling was to telephone to you."

They were silent a moment.

"Come aside into a quiet corner," Sir Hector muttered.

We sat at a café table—I was reminded of that other café table, where I had sat with Sir Hector and Professor Branden, while Branden seemed to gloat over the marvels of Satanoil—and looked at each other.

Sir Hector's face had an appearance of swelling. The veins in his neck and forehead stood out like whipcord.

"Murchison—Hermann," he said. He put his hands on our shoulders. "It must not be. Even now at the eleventh hour, it must not be. We three must prevent it. But how? How?"

"The whole thing, so far as I can see," Hermann said slowly, "rests upon Toad's accomplice or accomplices. Without them he won't dare come to us. Rufus Carlisle . . ."

The chief commissioner broke in hurriedly with:

"How do we know Carlisle is alone? And yet, if I could lay my hands on the old man, I would—I would . . . But even so, the risk is fearful and our chances are slim."

I could not follow this thought then, though I did so later. Nor, I think, could Hermann.

The detective said: "We will send men out after dark. All loiterers on the river banks will be taken in."

"Is that the best you can think of?" Sir Hector asked, savage in his anxiety. "Why, the word would pass as soon as the first man was taken. No use trying it."

"We must find Carlisle himself," I said. "If there are others in it, probably they will all be together. But I believe Carlisle to be the only one."

"We aren't even certain that Carlisle is one," Sir Hector said.

Hermann said, in a resolute tone: "I don't think there's a doubt of it. Murchison, will you hunt with me . . . until midnight? A last hunt? To try and find Carlisle?"

I said: "Willingly. But where shall we search? We don't even know where to start."

"After dusk on the river bank," Hermann said. "We must find Carlisle on the river bank. The appointment is for midnight. Until eleven-thirty we can still act."

"After that," Sir Hector said, with a twisted smile, "the deluge. No; the world has had its deluge. I was forgetting. It is the turn of fire."

We rose then. And there, I suppose, our blundering would have left us—had we not encountered at the very door of the café Professor Branden. Providence was with us.

CHAPTER 18

The Last Stand

HIS sunken eyes lit at sight of us. He exclaimed: "This is extraordinary. I have been searching for you everywhere, Corrilees.

"I have remembered where it was that I encountered that fanatic that you say may be Rufus Carlisle. It was just after I had turned out of Drummond Street into Macpherson Street. Was it Macpherson Street? I'm not sure. There's an old two-story brick place at the corner. A fourth rate hotel, I should say."

"Chugwin Street," Hermann injected.

"That's it," said the professor. He looked from one to another of us eagerly. "Any good?"

"Perhaps," Hermann said, looking at me. "This alters our plans. Meet me at ten o'clock tonight outside the Weather Bureau, Murchison. In the meantime, I'll scout in my own way."

"If you show yourself—" Sir Hector began.

"I won't," Hermann said. "But if Carlisle's anywhere handy, I'll place him."

I wondered, waiting at the Weather Bureau later, how he meant to carry out his search, and whether it had succeeded. But, at his first words I knew that the second query was answered.

He said in a whisper, as we shook hands: "I've found him, Murchison. I've found him."

"How did you do it?"

He told me as we walked.

"Wherever you want to know about the people in a locality, you won't go far wrong if you tackle the first small boy you meet who lives there. Youngsters have eyes and ears, Murchison, that we elders can't approach for sharpness. Tact and a couple of coins will work wonders. Rufus Carlisle is hiding in a back street. We're going there now."

"To arrest him?" I asked.

"Not at once. Unless I'm badly mistaken, Toad is in the same house. When and if he leaves it, we act. I have posted a plainclothes man at each end of the street, with a description of Carlisle. But no one else is to be stopped. It's a tight game, Murchison. I've never known a

tighter one—and for such high stakes."

A man stepped from the shadow of a tin fence, as we turned a corner.

Hermann said: "Well?"

"Three passed me, but not our man."

The detective looked at his watch.

"It's ten-thirty. Who were they, Straughay?"

"An old couple . . . It's all right. I know them well. They run a secondhand shop. And a man. Short, squat figure with glasses. Came out nine or ten doors along."

Hermann's elbow nudged me. I knew he had the same thought. It was Toad himself.

"Good. Get hold of Cordray from the other end, and the two of you come to number eleven. One at the front and one at the back. Come on, Murchison."

My heart beat fast as we entered the gate of number eleven. It was an old-fashioned weatherboard cottage, with a narrow strip of ground in front and at the side.

Hermann tried the door, found it fast, and tiptoed to where a light shone from a dusty window. The blind was drawn. We listened a moment, but there was no sound.

Feet sounded in the street, and Hermann said: "Here are the boys. We'll try the back now, Murchison."

I wondered, as we went, what Nancy would have thought if she had seen me creeping upon her father as if he were the greatest criminal in the land. I hated what we were doing. Sentiment has always obscured my judgment.

The back door yielded readily, and we found ourselves in a small vestibule. Light came from a doorway in the passage beyond. As we stood watching it, there came the scraping of a chair, and a thin, tremulous cough.

"He's there," Hermann said.

Old Carlisle, clad in his rusty black, was standing by a table when we entered. He faced us directly, but there was no recognition in his look. His eyes were vacant, his mouth flaccid.

I said gently: "Why, Mr. Carlisle, Nancy has been looking for you everywhere. You'll come home now, won't you?"

"Who are you?" his reedy voice asked.

The dullness was passing from his eyes, and his straggly beard twitched. "I don't know you."

There was alarm in his manner.

"I'm Maurice Murchison," I said. "Surely you remember me? I come from your home in East Melbourne. Nancy will be overjoyed to have found you."

"No!" he said. He blinked at us with a mixture of cunning and apprehension. "I don't know you."

Hermann stepped forward impatiently.

"Well, you soon will," he said, regardless of my appeal. "You're coming with me, Mr. Carlisle."

But the old man shrank from Hermann's touch. A crazy flame leaped into his eyes. He began to rant.

"I have no dealings with the ungodly. Men of perdition and of evil minds. For what saith the Scriptures . . .?"

"Now, now," Hermann said.

He caught one bony wrist firmly, but not ungently.

"Let me be. Let me be. There is work to do . . ."

It was pitiful to see his struggles.

Hermann panted. "He's like a wildcat!"

The last vestige of the old man's sanity seemed suddenly to vanish. He shrieked: "Fools. Fools. The end of all things is at hand. Woe unto the world, that shall be burned up with fire, neither shall there any more be a flood . . ."

With extraordinary adroitness he slipped from Hermann's clutch, doubled under my outflung arm, and darted into the passage.

"After him!" Hermann roared.

We collided in the doorway.

BUT Hermann's shouting did its work. We came presently upon Straughan on the back porch, with old Carlisle stiffened on his arm. When we carried him into the light, there was foam at the corners of his working mouth. His eyes were closed, and a blueness was spread over his lips.

Cordray came in from the front, and the four of us bent over our capture. I had the thought that Rufus Carlisle was dying.

"He looks pretty sick," Cordray said. "Get a taxi and run him to the hospital."

"Alive or dead, stay with him. Alive or dead, stay with him."

I ran to the corner of the street, with Straughan at my heels.

He said, as I hailed a cruising car:

"What's the lay, do you know?"

I said: "I don't know. Hermann won't say. They want him for something, I suppose."

It never occurred to me that Hermann should have searched the old man's pockets while I was absent. He looked at me queerly, I thought, when I entered. But he said nothing then.

"Off you go, you two," he directed the plainclothes men. "If you want me, I'll be at the premier's office for an hour or two after midnight. Keep the old man in the hospital until you hear from me."

Hermann and I walked in the wake of the departing taxi. We were silent and serious.

He said presently: "Well, we've spiked one of Toad's guns. The question is, are there any others? I wish we knew."

"What now?" I asked.

It was after eleven o'clock. Events are quicker in the telling than in the doing.

Hermann said: "Let's find a place for a cup of coffee."

We sat over the cups, smoking in silence, each busy with his thoughts. Mine, I am free to say, were anything but reassuring. I couldn't see what we had really gained by finding Rufus Carlisle. To be quite safe, we had to know. And we didn't know. At best, we could only guess.

We reached the Treasury building at five minutes to midnight, and were admitted by George Framling, who was stationed at the door.

"There isn't a soul in the place except ourselves," he said. He meant those of us who had been—who still were—leagued against Toad.

We left him waiting for Toad.

Sir Hector Corrilees stared at Hermann as we entered the premier's room, and his brows rose questioningly. Hermann nodded.

"What!" the chief commissioner said. "You found Carlisle? You mean that?"

"He's under guard at the Melbourne Hospital," Hermann said. "He took a fit or something."

Sir Hector turned to the premier.

"Hannaford, we've got Carlisle."

"What good is that?" Mr. Hannaford asked wearily. "It's too late, Corrilees, too late."

"Is it?" Sir Hector asked, with curious quietness. "Is it too late? We shall see."

Professor Branden, huddled on his chair, peered short-sighted at the chief commissioner.

Sir Hector began: "Hermann, did you find—?"

The opening of the baize door cut him short. Framling's pale face appeared. He seemed to hesitate; then stood aside with an audible intake of his breath.

I found myself confronted by the evil, amorphous features of the greatest criminal the world has ever known.

It was then that the premier, turning his eyes, inspired the only burst of anger we had ever known this enemy to display.

Mr. Hannaford said, in indescribable tones: "And so—you are The Toad?"

I hope never to witness anything more demoniacal than the swift convulsion of the creature's face at this innocent question.

His cheeks puffed, like those of the loathsome thing whose name he affected, and he seemed to eject his speech as poison is ejected—in a single stream.

"Toad, damn you. Toad!"

Toad reeked of insane egotism. Satan, his master, knew the satisfaction such a distinction might afford him. "There's only one Toad. You're the premier, Morgan Hannaford? You've had a bellyful at last, then. Fools, to pit yourselves against such brains as mine!"

Hermann, his farmer face suffused, said bluntly: "Whatever else you are, you're frankly a lunatic."

Strangely, the abuse seemed to calm Toad. He smiled as he seated himself. When next he spoke his voice held no anger, but only a cold arrogance.

"Well, Mr. Premier, we know each other at last."

Mr. Hannaford was contemptuously silent, his mouth aquiver.

Professor Branden, as if unable to restrain himself, shot a finger at Toad.

"Michael Domidorf," he said, "you are a cold-blooded murderer."

Toad sneered.

"What! It's you, Branden, is it? You with your little pettifogging chemistry. You fool."

I DON'T know what possessed me, but I said: "You called yourself Mertz. You are the man who took lodgings with poor old Rufus Carlisle."

He neither denied nor affirmed. He turned his flame-colored iris on me . . .

The premier's voice broke a nightmare spell.

He said: "Domidorf, Mertz, Toad—call yourself as you will. There is one thing you forget. You forget that there is a just and righteous God . . ."

"Can your God do more than destroy the world?" The laugh that was the travesty of a laugh chilled my spine. "I can do that. Therefore I am all the god you need. All the god this world shall boast. My will shall be supreme. The earth shall be my footstool. I, its greatest emperor. Toad, by the grace of Satan—"

"You blaspheme!" the premier said.

"Or if not," the abhorrent voice continued, "there shall be no more world. Think of it. Earth shall cease to be. But not before all flesh suffers as it never before suffered."

Something impelled me to look at Sir Hector Corrilees. His eyes were like stone, his mouth was a grim line.

He said: "You would do this thing?" The other licked his toad's lips.

"Haven't I just said so? The world accepts my terms, or it perishes. It may take its choice."

"Do you know," Sir Hector said very slowly and deliberately, "I think I shall kill you. There are some creatures too foul to be left alive."

Toad said easily: "Brave words, Mr. Police Commissioner; but quite helpless. Be sure I have seen to all that. If I do not return to my home within an hour of dawn, the thing you fear will come to pass."

Sir Hector's right hand had gone to his jacket pocket. Toad noted the action, and his look jeered. He knew he had us. His voice began to gloat sadistically.

"Picture it. Fair women and little children screaming to the melting of their

tender flesh. A world in flames . . . ”

I saw Sir Hector's hand leave his pocket, gripping the butt of an automatic pistol. The eyes of the others were fixed upon Toad in a sort of horrified fascination. They did not see.

But I saw. I saw the point of the automatic rising, and the strong lean finger tightening to its task of heroic madness. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Toad half rise from his seat, as realization swept over him.

And then a sharp crack, and a thin spurt of flame. And Toad sprawled again in his chair, a star of blood welling at the exact center of his forehead. Dead on the instant.

There was a moment of utter silence. Then the pistol fell from Sir Hector's hand to the table. As if it were the signal to release our paralyzed emotions, sound sprang like a gust of wind. The premier, his face ashen, his eyes wild, rose, swaying, to his feet.

He whispered: “Corrilees. Corrilees. What have you done? Dear God! What have you done?”

“I have done well,” Sir Hector answered. “It is a gamble. All life is a gamble. Better so than the other. If his only accomplice was Rufus Carlisle . . . ”

The telephone on the premier's table shrilled with such suddenness that we all started. Hermann took down the receiver with a shaking hand.

He said: “Dead . . . Heart failure! Thank you, Cordray. No; stay there until you hear from me. I shall be there soon after dawn—I hope.”

Professor Branden asked: “What now, Hermann?”

“Rufus Carlisle is dead.”

I looked at Toad. Even in those few moments death had stamped more deeply the vile resemblance to the creature he had parodied. The body was slumped forward grotesquely. The puffy lids were half-closed, and a film was on the strange, flame-colored irises.

Hermann, his lips compressed, commenced to search Toad's pockets. He found nothing. The premier was still standing. His look was now a little vacant. Presently he sank into his chair with bowed head.

“In any case,” Branden said, nodding

at the corpse, “how are we going to explain that?”

“I neither know nor care,” Sir Hector replied. “The world, I have no doubt, will call me murderer. Does it matter?”

“Surely,” I began, “no jury . . . ”

“Can ever be told the truth,” Sir Hector finished, with a pale smile. “No, Murchison; it won't work that way. Well, we shall see.”

HERMANN said, in a matter-of-fact tone: “At any rate, Toad need not remain here. Murchison, will you and Framling give me a hand? We'll put him in the basement.”

I sensed some covert meaning in his look. There was, I told myself, some task he would be at. He would share it only with Framling and me.

I had to fight to overcome my repugnance toward touching Toad. Hermann, being the strongest, took the shoulders; George and I, a leg apiece. In such manner we carried our ugly burden down the dark, silent stairways.

George said: “You've got some sort of a plan for getting rid of him?”

“I have,” the detective answered.

Hermann plunged a hand into his pocket. He drew forth a yellow marble.

Framling and I exclaimed simultaneously:

“Where did you get that?”

“I took it from Rufus Carlisle,” Hermann said. “Now you know why I didn't want Branden down here. He'd give his soul to have this to experiment with. Well, he won't get it. I tell you, Murchison, no man living is to be trusted with such a damnable secret. If I knew of such a man, though he were the most honest and upright in the world, I would shoot that man dead if I could, just as the chief shot Toad. Civilization could not risk him.”

As he spoke he bent over Toad and pushed the yellow marble into the dead, half-opened mouth.

It seemed scarcely a minute later that there was re-enacted before our eyes the annihilative process which had been the fate of Gregory. There came that frightful green flame out of the mouth of Toad, and his body became transparent and glowing as the Satanoil licked up its

juices. We were presently staring at nothing but a writhing green haze. It, too, vanished.

Hermann drew a deep breath.

"Exit Toad," he said.

Framling shuddered. "That was horrible."

"The chief is safe, so far as the laws of this world are concerned, at any rate," said the loyal Hermann. "If we are to perish when the day comes, the criminal brain that planned it will have gone first."

We returned to the premier's room.

Sir Hector asked: "What have you done? It's no use, you know. Hermann, I'll have to face the music."

"There's none to face," Hermann told him. "There's no murder without a corpse. And there's no Toad."

"What do you mean?" the premier asked.

Hermann told them.

Branden almost screamed at him.

"What! You had in your hand the most marvelous chemical discovery in the world, and you deliberately destroyed it?"

The premier checked him sternly.

Mr. Hannaford said—as if, indeed, he had heard, and was now echoing, what Hermann had said to Framling and me not five minutes back—"Branden, you hardly realize what you are saying. No man alive is to be trusted with such a vile

discovery. No man, Branden no man."

Poor Branden . . . He subsided sullenly, muttering, and twisting together his thin fingers. A picture of woe and disappointment.

"Thank you, Hermann," said Sir Hector, simply.

We sat then in silence through the interminable hours. There was no thought of our leaving the room while the uncertainty held. The drama was nearly finished. Shortly, the curtain must fall.

I think I dozed in sheer weariness of thought. I became conscious, suddenly, that Hermann had raised the blind of the window. As if to a common impulse, we gathered about it, looking out upon the brightening sky. The dawn was coming . . . had come.

I turned at a sound behind me.

The premier was on his knees against a chair. His thin shoulders were shaking.

Someone gripped my hand . . .

* * *

My task is done.

And yet . . . Sometimes in the dark hours my thought stirs affrightedly. Is there on earth, I wonder, a drop of Satan-oil remaining still? Might some innocent hand come one day to chance discovery of a yellow marble, and plunge earth to its doom?

I wish I knew.

THE END

ON THE NEWSSTANDS!

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(Continued from page 8)

I haven't yet seen a copy of any issue of the new magazine—but I am enthusiastic about it, nevertheless, and I look forward greatly to seeing the issues, as I hope to do eventually. I already own copies of all of Merritt's stories, but I find the prospect of seeing them with fresh illustrations by Virgil Finlay greatly pleasing. I hope you use no other artist, as I can't imagine any one but Finlay illustrating Merritt's stories satisfactorily. I only hope that each story gets at least six full page illustrations—the novels, at least, deserve this number or more if they are to have satisfactory artistic treatment.

I hope that you can print "The Woman of the Wood." Finlay could work pictorial wonders with this colourful sylvan fantasy. Ever since I first read this tale, I've been curious as to how he would go about depicting the trip across the lake through the mists, the haunted coppice, and the fascinating tree-people themselves.

I won't make further comments until I've actually seen the magazine—but I am sure that I'll be a delighted, as well as a satisfied reader.

Sincerely,
Thomas F. L. Cockcroft
3 Stilling Street
Melling, Lower Hutt
New Zealand

ED. We hope that you will soon see a copy of A. MERRITT'S FANTASY.

MERRITT NEVER EXCELLED

Dear Editor:

The first mistake you've made in the new publication, A. MERRITT'S FANTASY, makes me wonder how you could have slipped up on such a thing. It seems to appear that even the typesetter suspicioned something wrong; maybe he too was wondering how in blazes "The Smoking Land" got into the pages of a magazine of Merritt's quality, thereby causing him to commit so many errors typesetting that at the turn of each page, the reader was dumfounded into approaching the sublime through what seemed the ridiculous. As an example, take Chapter 10 which was mistakenly printed, The Running Dog, when to all appearances the heading should have read, The Running Water. Just imagine a "dog" reading that chapter, and what would be his reactions? Let's suppose Murder, the Esquimaux dog, was able to read and I showed him your mistake, how might he express himself? In the words of George Challis, "Murder, the rascal, turned his head and looked up to me with the biggest, widest, reddest laugh that I ever saw". You say that George Challis, alias Frederick Faust, was one of the world's most prolific writers, commonly known as the "king of pulp magazines", who wrote on an average of one full length novel every three weeks. His very productivity, therefore, is proof positive that quality is lacking nine times out of ten. In my estimation, "The Smoking Land" is quite mediocre, and definitely should have been left out of A. MERRITT'S FANTASY. Frankly, I am of the opinion that

whenever Frederick Faust wrote a bad story he'd use one of his disguises to hide the shame, and "George Challis" seems to take the brunt of his self-inflicted punishment. What a difference when compared to a topnotch writer like Max Brand—the better part of Faust!

On the other hand, there isn't a story written that can surpass "Three Lines of Old French". It has the most tenderly beautiful love motive every put into words, and to see through the eyes of Peter Laveller, is to truly believe in eternal life. "Death—oh, the foolish, fearful hearts of men!" Can anyone vision the mind's power at a time when the fiendishness of war's brutality tears away the slim veil bridging the tangible from the intangible? No matter what type of story Merritt writes, he has a God-given power to blend the incomparably gentle, the sweet, and the ever tempting, at one moment; then he can make his reader see the veritable stigma of a hell unfathomable in the next. Look where you may, and I speak truly when I say, there never has been nor never will be a story to surpass "Three Lines of Old French".

Going off the beaten track a little, I find with a good deal of satisfaction that something new has been added, the thoughtful article by Ray Cummings entitled "The Science of Time Travel". Comparing Time to a motion picture film of infinite length seems feasible enough, and with a little imagination I can see changing patterns of my image strewn side by side in the film of time for the length of a life-span, but when I think of going back in the past to a replica of myself indelibly engraved upon this scroll, it'll take something more than the love or "Lucie de Tocquelain" to accomplish the miracle!

There doesn't seem to be much to "The Seal Maiden". It read more like a synopsis of a long novel, but I thought it quite unique in presentation, good, to be truthful, unusually worthwhile for brevity and conciseness, and the straightforward simplicity of narration.

Sincerely,
Joseph Kankowski
9 Glennon Place
West Orange, New Jersey

ED: Sorry that you didn't like "The Smoking Land"—but you might read George Evans' letter which follows yours.

FANS DISAGREE

Dear Editor:

Congratulations! Issue #2 of AMF is the best all-around issue of any of the group Popular Publications puts out. Some readers are bound to disagree here, claiming issues featuring Merritt's own work to be best, but having read and re-read all his yarns they were flat issues—although issue #1 was worth the quarter just for Robert Arthur's story. You must have many more by him as I'm sure I remember several from *Argosy* in the late 30s. By all means run them. It may be of some interest to your readers to know Arthur co-authors a very interesting radio story called "The Mysterious Traveler." Since WOR often

advertises its lineup in your magazines, maybe you'd like to pass on this information. We get it here at 9:30 Tuesday evenings; other localities may have different times.

I read "The Smoking Land" on its first appearance, but it is certainly worth re-reading! Faust had one of the most readable writing styles. His death was a personal loss to most magazine fans. Under whatever name he happened to write them, any and all his fantasies are most welcome, whenever you can print them. Another story which will be welcome is "Lords of Creation" by Eando Binder. I see it's out in book form, which may discourage you running it. However, I would sooner pay \$3.00 for a magazine issue, with cover and illustrations, than for the book with only a third-rate dust-jacket to illuminate it.

An author who contributed many stories to *Argosy*, of which many fantasies would surely be worth reissuing, is Joel Townsley Rogers. No one, not even the great Merritt, ever did finer writing than Rogers, and I certainly hope you can come up with something by him. As he still does an occasional story you might even get something new.

One last story though: *Argosy* carried "Bells Across A Valley", a short, author unknown, which was a honey. Really different. Look it up, please!

Now a few thousand words on the matter of illustrations. Knowing something about the racket, I'll say flatly that Lawrence is your best illustrator, and his main misfortune, as far as getting much credit goes, is that science-fiction fans, who read of the future, live in the past, and it's sheer nostalgia that keeps them yelling for most of the old timers, like Paul etc. It's obvious from the illustrations in the "Creep, Shadow!" issue though, that Lawrence has finally got more work than he can handle, so it's pleasing to hear that Finlay has finally gotten squared away, and we'll see more of him. He is Lawrence's closest competition. To those of you who'll argue the point, I can give you chapter and verse to prove my point.

As for the rest whom your fans demand—well Bok gets a lot of votes, but, looking them over, issue in, issue out, those votes all come from the same half-dozen or so fans. So don't let them snow you under, Ed. As for his doing covers—well, not unless he can do better than those dust-jackets he's done for the book publishers. No sir! In *Super Science* you have a good scratch-board man (he who did the drawing of the hand holding a miniature man in a glass case). Outside of him Lawrence and Finlay have no competitors.

That ought to be plenty for now. Thanks for bringing out A. MERRITT'S FANTASY, and best wishes for a long, prosperous life for it!

Sincerely,
George Evans
Belmont Ave.
North Arlington, N. J.

ED: Thanks for your comments on the art work. We will in all probability print your request, "Lords of Creation" by Eando Binder, but can't promise when.

COLLECTS MERRITT

Dear Editor:

I have been a Merritt Fan since reading his first story published in *Argosy* years ago, "Ship of Ishtar" or "Pigeon Blood", I can't recall which was the first. To say I was pleasantly surprised to see a magazine printed under his name, would be putting it mildly.

I had at one time a very good collection of his stories which was destroyed by fire.

For several years now I have been trying to get a complete collection of his works, especially his book length novels.

So far I have only "Creep, Shadow!" and "Fox Woman".

Inasmuch as my ability to realize this ambition has been limited by finances, I would not be willing to pay any premium at this time.

My success in getting this collection would not defer me from continuing to read the A. MERRITT'S FANTASY as long as it continues to try to equal the first two issues.

Now I want to ask you something: Can you tell me how I might obtain the complete works of A. Merritt?

Respectfully yours,
Thomas W. Ward
Box 75, Conover, N. C.

ED. A. MERRITT'S FANTASY will publish as many stories by Merritt as we have the rights to. There will probably be about ten or twelve in all. If you do not find all the stories you want in this publication, we would suggest that you write to Mr. Julius Unger, Box 35, Brooklyn, N. Y. He deals exclusively in old books and in some old magazines, and has back issues that are no longer on the newsstands. Old copies of FFM and FN which have Merritt stories sell for \$1.00; stories appearing in book form cost from \$3.00 to \$4.00.

Notice the letter from Charles H. Pounds of Atlanta, Georgia. Perhaps some of these fantasy fans would have other suggestions.

FOR TRADE

Dear Editor:

"The Smoking Land" by George Challis was swell. Thanks for choosing this novel for your second issue. For future issues I would like to see two short stories by Max Brand dug out of Popular's files and reprinted, "The Lost Garden", and "John Ovington Returns".

I have many many issues of FN and FFM for trade with the readers of AMF. Also I have several rare Burroughs items and a few rare cloth bound fantasy items. I want most anything by the following: Edison Marshall, Max Brand, David Manning, George Owen Baxter, A. B. Cunningham and George Challis.

Yours very truly,
Charles H. Pounds
497 East Ave. N.E.
Atlanta, Georgia

ED. Readers, here is your chance. Can you be of help? Notice letter from Thomas W. Ward.

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A. MERRITT'S FANTASY

NEEDS HELP

Dear Editor:

I'm writing to congratulate you on the success of your new magazine, A. MERRITT'S FANTASY. I think it one of the major publishing feats of the year, and I'm looking forward to many years of enjoyment with this newest of fantasy magazines.

Being a younger fan I have been able to put my hands on very few of the real classics, but with FFM, FN, and now AMF I know my collections will rapidly increase.

When I say "increase" that's just what I mean! I've had to start all over again just recently. After finally completing my file of FFM I saw it go up in smoke. Now, without many funds on hand I hope through the Readers' Column in the three top fantasy magazines to replace what has been lost. If any of you readers have back issues of FFM you can sell at no great price, I would sincerely like to hear from you.

But enough of my troubles, and more about AMF.

I was disappointed not to be informed who your artist was. Naturally I had expected to see the great Finlay, but was pleased with—? Next time please let us know who the artist is.

"Creep, Shadow!" was an excellent classic for your first issue, and was a good Merritt story. No matter who the author is, I think Merritt is just a little better. For beauty of description he can't be beat.

One suggestion—foolish? Maybe! But one that will make anyone feel at home with your new publication. In other words I missed the advertisements of what was in the current issues of FFM and FN. Think I'll call it a letter this time. Hope this sees print so I can get help from your family of readers.

Sincerely,
Gay E. Terwilliger, Jr.
P.O. Box 387
Nampa, Idaho

ED: We hope that some fantasy fans will help you out. Best of luck.

NORWESCON!

Dear Editor:

May I take this opportunity of enlightening the readers of A. MERRITT'S FANTASY on a point of possible interest?

In '49 it was the Cinvention; in '50 it's the Norwescon! The Eighth World Science-Fiction Convention, that is. The annual get together of fandom this time will take place in Portland, Oregon on the Labor Day week-end of September 2, 3 and 4. As you perhaps may know this is the top fan event of the year. In attendance will be pro and fan editors, authors and illustrators; fantasy bibliophiles and collectors. In addition you can expect fans of all kinds, shapes and sizes, hundreds of them, we hope! If you

(Please continue on page 126)

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A. MERRITT'S FANTASY

(Continued from page 124)

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Joe Salta
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ED. Here's your chance, Fans!

VERY PLEASED

Dear Editor:

For two months I have been awaiting your publication of Jack Mann's "The Ninth Life". When the current (it is current as this is written, I mean) issue of A. MERRITT'S FANTASY arrived, it was with very little trepidation that I began to read the novel. Four hours later, having arrived at THE END on page 128, I snapped out of my trance with the satisfied knowledge that all my anticipations (and none of my fears) had been realized. The least I can say about the tale is that it is wonderful!

Aha! A mystery: where is E. Charles Vivian, also known as Jack Mann? Maybe the vengeance of Sekhmet has caught up with him?

All I can do is emphatically reaffirm a desire to see Merritt's non-fiction and his wondrous poetry printed in AMF. We fans will continue to request these until we get 'em! Also in early issues reserve places for Mann's "Maker of Shadows", Kline's "Call of the Savage", Cummings' "The Fire People", and any spare Lovecraft or Howard tales that might be lying around.

Oh, yes: the novelette, "The Little Doll Died" was very good and so were the illustrations.

I breathlessly await the Merritt classic chalked up for the next issue. Cover and illustrations by Finlay, of course?

Sincerely,
Robert E. Briney
561 West Western Ave.
Muskegon, Michigan

ED. So glad that you enjoyed the April issue.

(Please continue on page 128)

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A. MERRITT'S FANTASY

(Continued from page 126)

THE ARTISTS

Dear Editor:

A few comments, if I may, on the April issue of A. MERRITT'S FANTASY. Although Merritt was absent this time, AMF showed a decided improvement over the first two issues. Not in fiction quality, of course; no one can beat Merritt. But the cover and interior illustrations were better, and the printing was much improved. The cover, needless to say, was excellent. Saunders' style is familiar, but I can't seem to place it. The best of the interiors was the one done by Callé on page 95. A masterpiece. The pics for the novel were also good. In my opinion, Von Dongen is the equal of Finlay, and Finlay has been my favorite fantasy artist for years. I, for one, am hoping you'll keep Callé, Saunders, and Von Dongen producing. Perhaps you could get Callé to do a cover. That would really be something to behold!

"The Ninth Life" was far better than the same author's "Valley of Silent Men" and "City of Wonders", and the last two were no flops in themselves. "The Ninth Life" gets a four-star rating in my book. The plot reminded me somehow of Merritt, and that's a compliment to any author.

Ted Roscoe's inappropriately titled "The Little Doll Died" was not up to expectations, but was good due to fine characterization and realistic dialogue. And, too, the theme is one that never fails to fascinate me. It's been used in movies many times, and always with favorable results. May we expect a Lovecraft story soon? If so, give us something besides "The Colour Out of Space". The tale is a classic, no doubt of that, but it's been anthologized and reprinted so often that one would think that Lovecraft never wrote anything else. Personally, I'd prefer "The Silver Key". The former is semi-science-fiction; the latter horror-fantasy. When you so use Lovecraft, try Callé on the illustrations. The results should be interesting.

Did it ever occur to you that Burroughs' famous "Carson of Venus" should be available for AMF, FN or FFM? It once appeared in Argosy as a serial. The same goes for Kline's "Planet of Peril".

Which should be enough hints for this time.

Sincerely,
Charles L. Morris
111 Providence Street
Gaffney, S. C.

ED. Many thanks for your letter.

INCOMPARABLE

Dear Editor:

May I offer my congratulations for a magazine I have been wanting to come to the newsstands since I first read a copy of A. Merritt's work. He was incomparable in the science-fiction field . . . and I do think he is in a class

READERS' COLUMN

by himself. No one can reach him, not Lovecraft, Smith, Quinn, or any of them. I have read all that I can find of his works, hoarding the copies as priceless possessions, but have been unable to find a lot of them, such as: "The Moon Pool", "The Face In The Abyss", "The Dwellers In The Mirage", "Conquest of the Moon Pool" and "The Fox Woman". I do hope you print these in your publications.

Jora Brown
7735 Atlantic Blvd.
Bell, California

ED: You will find most of the above mentioned stories sometime in A. MERRITT'S FANTASY. So glad that this is what you want.

SO LITTLE MERRITT

Dear Editor:

I have just finished your February issue; I very much enjoyed "The Smoking Land" and particularly Merritt's "Three Lines of Old French." However, there is something I would like to know: if this is Merritt's magazine, why only one story by Merritt, and a short one at that? I am a great admirer of Merritt, and I think you could do better than one story of his. I think your idea of using other authors besides Merritt a good one, as it offers a chance for contrast. If you are going to print full-length novels by other authors, might I suggest "Return to Yesterday"?

I am interested in contacting other stf fans and will appreciate any help you can give me in this.

Yours truly,
Bruce Lane
1630 Old Shak Rd. E.
Minneapolis, Minn.

ED: As explained in our April issue this new fantasy is dedicated to Merritt and is designed to bring back his memorable triumphs of fantasy as well as outstanding fantasies by other authors. Merritt was not a prolific writer so we would not put two of his stories in the same issue.

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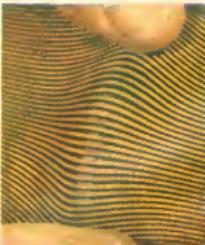
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